

5 WESTERN NOVELS

WINTER 25c

Magazine

FEATURING

THEY CALLED ME KILLER

BY RAY GAULDEN

THE WAGON SOLDIER

BY MALCOLM WHEELER-NICHOLSON

TUMBLEWEED WITH SPURS

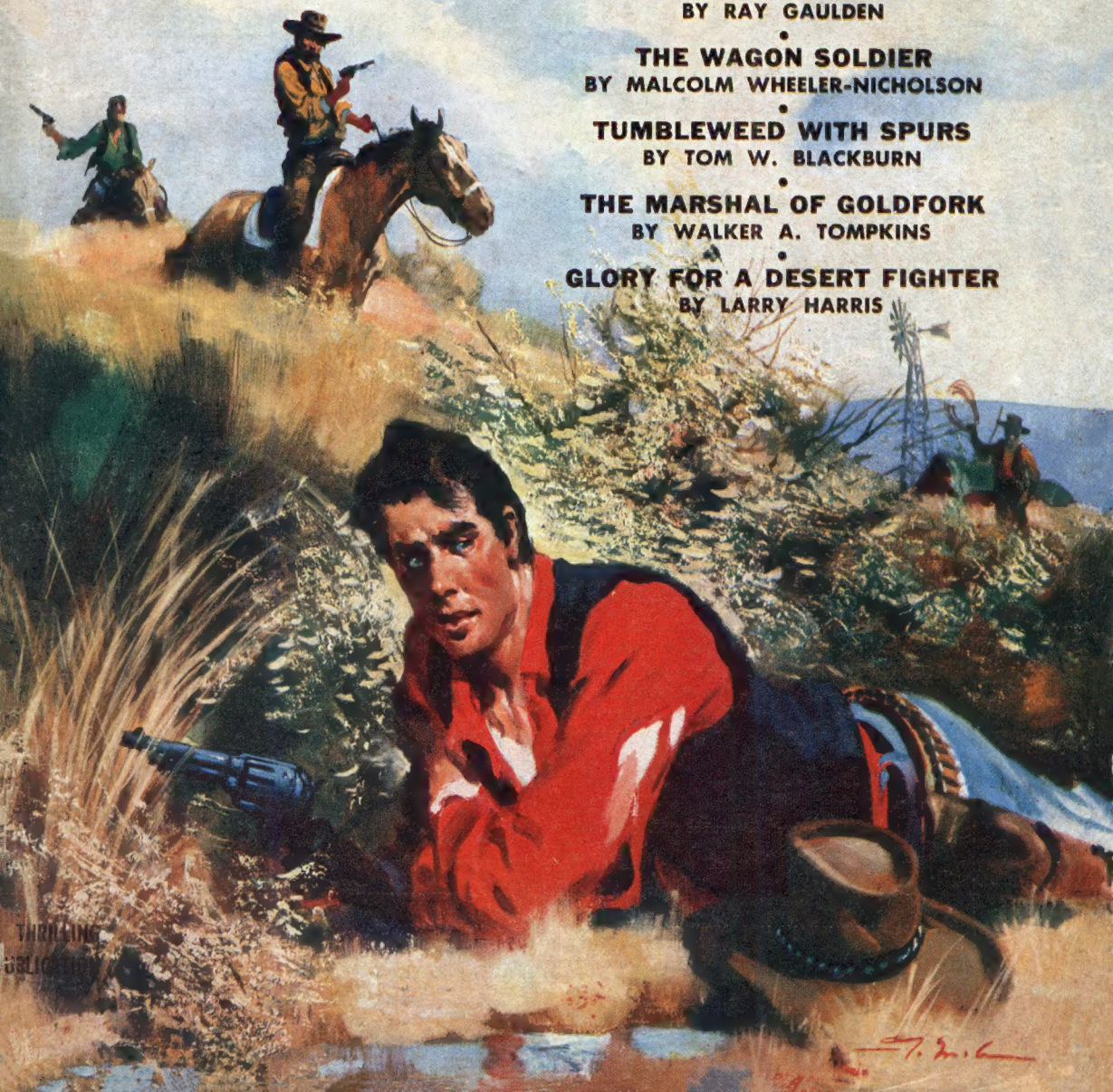
BY TOM W. BLACKBURN

THE MARSHAL OF GOLDFORK

BY WALKER A. TOMPKINS

GLORY FOR A DESERT FIGHTER

BY LARRY HARRIS



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5 WESTERN NOVELS

Magazine

Vol. 9, No. 1

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Winter, 1954

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How I foxed the Navy

by Arthur Godfrey

The Navy almost scuttled me. I shudder to think of it. My crazy career could have ended right there. Who knows, I might still be bumming Chesterfields instead of selling them.

To be scuttled by the Navy you've either got to do something wrong or neglect to do something right. They've got you both ways. For my part, I neglected to finish high school.

Ordinarily, a man can get along without a high school diploma. Plenty of men have. But not in the Navy. At least not in the U. S. Navy Materiel School at Bellevue, D. C., back in 1929. In those days a bluejacket had to have a mind like Einstein's. And I didn't.

"Godfrey," said the lieutenant a few days after I'd checked in, "either you learn mathematics and learn it fast or out you go. I'll give you six weeks." This, I figured, was it. For a guy who had to take off his shoes to count



above ten, it was an impossible assignment.

I was ready to turn in my bell-bottoms. But an ad in a magazine stopped me. Here, it said, is your chance to get special training in almost any subject—mathematics included. I hopped on it. Within a week I was enrolled with the International Correspondence Schools studying algebra, geometry and trig for all I was worth.

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THE Pack Saddle

PEGLEG AND POWDERSMOKE

By Warren Kuhn

THE THREE men crouched, ready now for the kill. By the cabin door were the two buckskinned whites, their skinning knives low, the blades already wet and red. The third man, a half-breed, hunkered on a torn-up bale of beaver pews, tomahawk high, eyes slitted with hate. The three glared at that single man who faced them in the cabin's center, a stocky, bleeding figure whose one good leg streamed red while the other—a pegleg of wood—was splintered with axe and knife thrusts.

But these were not the first beaver-maddened cutthroats "Pegleg" Tom Smith had ever faced. Even now, bleeding from a score of wounds, his wooden leg hacked by their attacks, he faced them grimly. They had found him alone in this deserted way station where he had sought refuge from a Colorado blizzard in the 1830's. They had seen his rich cache of furs and his wooden leg. Smith had felt their eyes on him as he stumped around the fire, fixing a meal. And it was then they had struck at this supposedly helpless man.

A scream ripped now from the half-breed's throat, the war cry of the Utes. The savage flung himself at Smith, tomahawk flashing down. At the same instant the other two outlaws rushed him.

With a mighty effort Smith threw his weight on his good leg, swinging the wooden one around in a deadly arc. The splintered surface smashed into the breed's neck and the breed flopped, neck broken, hatchet digging deep into the dirt floor.

Smith hunched then to meet the onslaught of the other two. His own knife was ready now. One of the whites came in, bearded face black with anger. Smith thought fast. Throwing his body to one side, he brought his knife hand straight up. The rush bent his

weakened leg and it buckled, carrying him down in a heap, but his knife struck home and the outlaw tore with dying fingers at the blade.

Then the last of the evil trio was on him, changing his rush desperately to swing his blade at the helpless figure of Smith sprawled on the floor. But this time the wooden leg was stretched out, high enough to catch a running foot and trip it. The man went down in a yelling tangle and Smith's groping fingers found the breed's tomahawk, wrenched it free of the hard earth and brought it crashing down.

It was over in seconds and the three attackers lay still on the cabin floor. Beyond them, the pews they had sought to steal lay scattered amid the wreckage, but Smith let a grim smile grow on his gasping lips. The pews were still his—and thee more killers had found Pegleg Smith a formidable foe.

By deeds such as this, and despite his leg of wood, Smith's legendary fame swept the beaver country in the early days of Colorado and the Rocky Mountain West. Born in Kentucky, one of a family of thirteen, Smith early took his fighting seriously. A tyrannical schoolmaster tried to whip him and Smith broke his slate over the man's head and joined a caravan for Santa Fe.

Several years later, in 1827, after countless Indian battles on the Gila and Colorado rivers. Smith took a job with famed Milton Sublette to trap beaver in North Park, Colorado. There he was to lose his leg. In a battle against Utes, an arrow struck the limb above the ankle, shattering the bones. When Smith tried to go for his rifle, the bones stuck in the ground, whereupon as soon as the Indians were driven off, he took the cook's butcher knife and amputated his own limb.

Later at a friendly Indian camp, the braves wailed at their old friend's loss. Chanting, they chewed certain roots and spat them on the stump. Within a short time, the wound healed and Smith fashioned a wooden leg for it, earning himself the name "Pegleg" from his comrades.

Not only was Smith a trapper and Indian fighter. He became famous as one of the originators of the profitable horse raids on the California *rancheros*. A difficult journey at best through the snow-clogged forests of the Sierras, he nevertheless led his band of trappers into the sunny Sacramento valley, and later to the waters of San Francisco Bay.

He and his men spent the first winter at Monterey. They attended fandangos, watched battles between grizzly bears and bulls and drank aguardiente. However, when winter was over, much to the Spaniard's regret, Smith became a man of business, running off fine blooded herds of horses to sell to the emigrants then beginning to cross the mountains.

When one wagon-train boss asked him what the horses had cost him, Smith replied in all seriousness: "They cost me dearly."

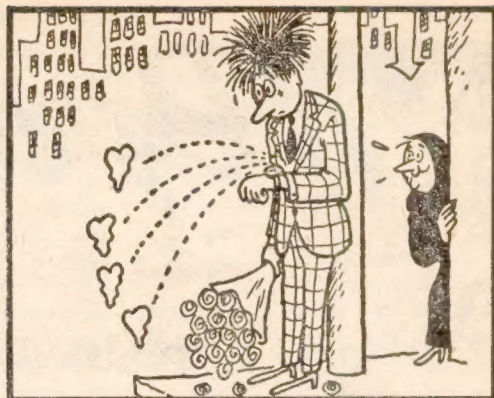


Three of my squaws lost brothers, and one of them a father on that trip, and I came near going under myself."

He was a man of simple words but he was always fair to his version of justice. The Spanish dons had enslaved many peaceful Indian tribes, in which lived many of Smith's blood-brothers; thus he paid off his debt to the Spaniards and brought transportation and food to the early settlers.

In later years Smith turned to prospecting. Today, some hundred years later, the famous lost Pegleg Mine in Arizona is still being sought.

His final days were spent drinking grog near a Frisco saloon, where he died in 1866. There, sitting back in the damp sunlight, he must have watched the rich merchants strut along the quays and smiled, remembering. For only a hardened trapper like himself could really know what powdersmoke and hell had been gone through for every single beaver hat worn by those soft and fancy gentlemen.

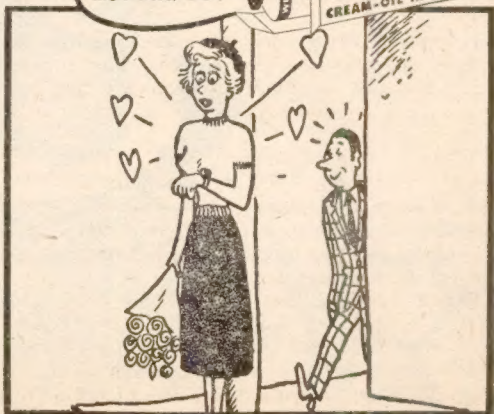


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knew there always had to be some dead ones

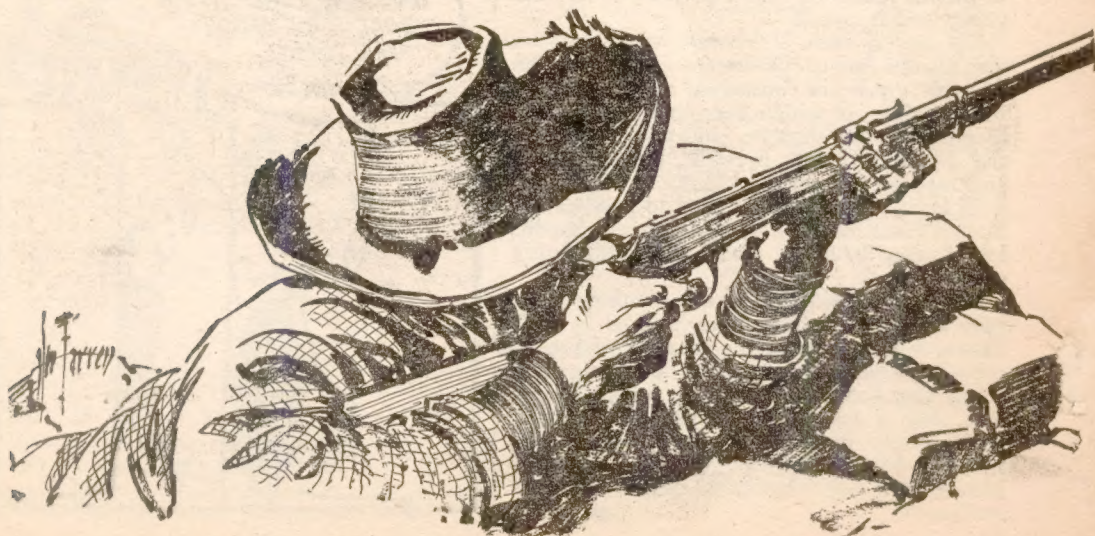
if the live ones were to have range peace!

I

THERE was a job waiting for me up ahead, a gun job, and I'd most likely have to kill somebody before it was done. I wasn't worried about it, though, because killing was my business. Just like some men learn to be wheelwrights or saddle-makers, I had my trade too.

According to the last fella I talked to the town of Starbuck shouldn't be but about another ten miles. It was late afternoon and I'd come a long ways that day, covered a lot of hot dusty miles. There was good shade here in this little creek, so I built a fire, feeling the need of some Arbuckle's.

While I was sipping the coffee, I caught a flash of something



Killer

A Novel by RAY GAULDEN



Willie cut loose with his
carbine and the bullet hit
me alongside the head . . .

white a little ways up the creek. Beyond the clearing where I'd built my fire the willows were pretty thick, so I couldn't see much of the bank. Whatever it was I had spied was coming toward me, darting in and out of the brush. I sat up a little straighter and craned my neck, curious and a little cautious, too.

Brush made a cracking sound and then I got a glimpse that caused my eyes to bug out. It was a woman running through the brush, a woman without any clothes on. Maybe that sun was hotter than I figured. It must be to cause a man to see something like that.

I batted my eyes a couple of times, figuring she'd go away. She didn't, though. She was coming straight toward my camp, getting close now, but the brush kept me from getting a good look. Probably some buck-toothed squaw, I told myself, and tried to relax.

At last she stopped on the edge of the clearing, keeping out of sight in the brush as she called, "Hey, mister!"

That voice, reminding me of mountain spring water bubbling over rocks, didn't belong to any squaw. I got up, slopping hot coffee on myself, and didn't even curse as I started across the clearing.

"Don't come any closer," she said, kind of desperate. "I—I haven't any clothes on."

I had a glimpse of a bare thigh, just enough to whip my imagination, but I forced myself to stand hitched. "What can I do for you, ma'am?"

"You can stop staring," she snapped. "And get me something to put on."

I grinned at that. "Ma'am, I'm not in the habit of carrying any female duds around with me. What happened to you, anyway?"

"I was in swimming up the creek a piece," she told me, her voice getting angry as she thought about it. "And some sneaking, low-down polecat stole my clothes!"

"Kind of a dirty trick to play on a lady."

"It's about what you'd expect of Sid Nanco."

The name didn't mean anything to me, but I stopped grinning and went over to where my horse was grazing. I untied my slicker and without going too close, tossed it into the brush. "That's the best I can

do, ma'am."

I went back to the fire and sat down, waiting for her to come out. Pretty soon the brush parted and I had my first good view of her. She was small, almost lost in that big slicker that was dragging the ground around her bare feet. Her face went with the rest of her, small, but smooth and pretty. Her eyes were blue or gray, I couldn't tell which, but they were kind of smoldering like it wouldn't take much to get a good fire started.

"That coffee smells good," she said, standing close to the fire and hugging her arms.

I only had the one cup, so I got up and started down to the creek to wash it out, but she stopped me, saying, "Don't bother. You don't look like you've got hydrophobia."

I POURED her a cup of coffee and sat back, watching her sip it, finding it hard to stop staring. Her hair was brown and shiny, kind of mussed up now, but she looked good with it that way.

"I'm Nan Torbet," she said, sitting down and tucking the oilskin around her. "You're a stranger in these parts, aren't you?"

I nodded. "The name's Cole Bellew." I never did believe in keeping my name a secret, but if she'd heard of me, she didn't let on, and she didn't ask me what I was doing here or where I was heading.

Turning her head, she gazed wistfully along the creek. "My dad used to have an outfit up there, and in the summertime I never missed a day going swimming."

"You don't live around here now?"

She shook her head and there was something like bitterness in her eyes. "No, we live over in those hills to the west."

"But you still come back to your old swimming hole?"

"Yes, and then today Sid Nanco came along and found me there. He tried to get me to come out of the water, and when I wouldn't, he stole my clothes, took my horse and went off laughing." She paused, and then in a low, bitter tone said, "Damn him."

I reached for my Durham sack and got a cigarette started, asking, "Who's this Nanco?"

"He's foreman for Fletcher Ives who

owns the Ladder outfit."

I kept my face straight, showing her nothing, but there was more than casual interest in me now. Fletcher Ives was the man who had sent for me, the man who had offered a thousand bucks to get me here."

"If I'd had a gun, I'd have made Sid Nanco laugh from the other side of his face," Nan said, and I bet she would have, too. She didn't act the least bit shy for a gal who was talking to a man she'd never seen before.

"I take it," I murmured, "that you don't think much of this Fletcher Ives or his foreman."

"They're both a couple of skunks."

I didn't let that bother me any because Ives was bound to be top dog in this country, and folks have a habit of not liking big men. There's always two sides to a story and I didn't make decisions till I'd heard both of them.

"I've got to be getting along," I said, tossing my smoke into the fire. "Can I take you home?"

"I'd sure appreciate it, mister."

I got on my horse and she got on behind, holding me around the waist, and telling me which way to go. With her arms around me that way, I couldn't help being aware of her, and I kept remembering that she didn't have anything on under that slicker.

The creek where I'd met her ran through the middle of a long valley, and we rode across it toward the hills on the west side. It was pretty country where the grass grew tall, the kind of range a cowman dreams about. We swung a little south until we came to a cow trail and we followed it, climbing up through piñon and cedar.

She asked me if I figured to stop off in Starbuck and when I said I did, she let it go at that. I've been told that I've got a cold, killer look about me, but if Nan had me sized up, she kept it to herself. After we'd traveled for about an hour, I began to wonder where we were heading. This wasn't much of a trail and I had the feeling it led to nowhere. If there was a ranch up here, there should have been some wagon ruts, but there wasn't anything but those cow tracks.

Just when I was getting mighty curious, she told me I could stop. "It's just a little

ways," she said. "I can make it from here."

I looked around for some sign of a house, but there wasn't any. "I might as well take you on home," I told her.

"I've put you to enough bother," she said, and by now it was plain enough that she didn't want me to see where she lived. I didn't savvy it, but I got down and reached up to give her a hand, grinning because she looked so damned comical in that big slicker. She colored a little and sat there smiling at me.

When I reached up to swing her down, the slicker came open a little and a rounded knee peeked out at me. I stopped grinning, my mouth suddenly dry, and because I'm human like anybody else, I jerked her up against me, held her and hunted for her lips. They weren't hard to find because she threw her head back, letting me see the smoky look in her eyes.

MY HEAD began to buzz but just about the time I got down to kissing her a man stepped out of the brush with a rifle in his hands.

"Turn loose of her," he said, his voice sounding like a lot of rusty nails rattling around in a keg. "Get away from him, Nan."

I let go and Nan stepped back, her breath making a sharp sound, but I was looking at the man with the rifle. He was an old geezer that reminded me of a string bean that's laid out in the sun for a long time. He wore patched overalls and a floppy brimmed hat with two pieces of white hair sticking out from under the brim like horns.

"It's all right, papa," Nan told him. "This is Cole Bellew. I ran into some trouble and he was kind enough to give me a hand."

"I could see what he was giving you," the old man growled. "Where'd you meet him?"

"Down on the creek near our old place." Nan glanced at me, her face the color of a ripe tomato. "Cole, this is my father, Ezra Torbet."

Ezra lowered the rifle a little, but he didn't offer to shake hands, and those sharp old eyes of his were giving me a good going over. "Cole Bellew, huh?" he murmured thoughtfully.

Briefly, Nan told him about Sid Nanco

stealing her horse and clothes while she was in swimming. All the time she talked, Ezra was watching me, and when she finished, he said, "You better go get some clothes on."

She lingered a bit, looking at me. "If you're going to be in Starbuck, I'll return your slicker."

I wasn't worried about the slicker, but I had a yen to see her again. "I'll be at the hotel," I said.

Her eyes met mine and the old man seemed to sense that something was passing between us. He scowled at Nan. "You, get along."

She started off and then looked back over her shoulder, flashing me a warm smile. "Thanks for helping me out."

I stared after her, forgetting Ezra until she was out of sight in the timber. Then I reached for my tobacco sack, wondering what he was doing out here in the brush afoot. Ezra studied me in silence till I had the smoke going.

Then he said, "I've heard of you. Made quite a name for yourself. Some say you're faster than Wyatt Earp, that you've killed a dozen men."

"Folks have a habit of building a lot out of a little."

His mouth was thin with contempt. "I ain't got no use for a damned gunslinger."

I'd heard that kind of talk before and there was a time when it bothered me, but not any more. "I never shot a man without giving him an even break," I said steadily.

He kept holding the rifle like he couldn't make up his mind whether he should use it or not. "What are you doing in this part of the country?" he asked.

I handed him a thin grin. "You're pretty nosy, old man. I could be just drifting."

He shook his head. "A gunswift like you never drifts. He sits around in some cowtown saloon, drinking and gambling and playing with the gals as long as his money lasts. When he's broke he sells his gun to somebody and goes out to kill some poor devil."

"I'm not broke," I said. "And I don't like poker." He was starting to rub me the wrong way, so I went to my horse and stepped up.

"I reckon you're going to work for Fletcher Ives," he said, his voice still dripping contempt. "And you ought to

feel right at home on Ladder, seeing as how the outfit is swarming with your kind."

"Maybe I'll see you around," I said, lifting the reins.

He gave me a bleak stare. "You better stay out of these hills, and keep away from my gal."

I smiled at him and turned my horse to ride back the way we'd come. When I reached the main trail running through the valley, I swung north and headed toward Starbuck, still thinking of the girl and her father, wondering what the deal was. Nan hadn't let me take her all the way home and I had a feeling the old man didn't happen along out there, that maybe he was a lookout or something.

Then I remembered holding the girl in my arms and that's all I could think about the rest of the way to town.

II

IT WAS dark by the time I got to Starbuck and most of the buildings were closed for the night. It wasn't much of a town, just a little cluster of abodes with a creek running back of it and a few shade trees scattered along the dusty street. Not much, I thought, to set it apart from a hundred other towns I'd been in.

After I'd turned my horse over to a sleepy-eyed Mexican at the livery stable, I rented a room at the hotel and washed up. Then I went over to a little hole in the wall with a sign that said "Cafe" over the door. The grub wasn't bad, but the cook was one of those gents that likes to talk a lot about nothing. I got out of there as soon as I could.

Standing in front of the place, I made a smoke and looked at the sign across the front of the town's only saloon, wondering if I should have a beer before I turned in. Of course I could have ridden out to Ladder and had my confab with Fletcher Ives, but I never was one to get in a rush. Tomorrow would be soon enough, and besides I was used to fellers looking me up.

It was the middle of the week and the saloon wasn't doing much business. A couple of townsmen were playing a slow game of poker and a feller that looked like a drummer was having a drink at one end of the bar. Everybody gave me a glance

and the room got pretty quiet, but in a little while the men went on with what they were doing.

I drank one beer and got out of there, wondering if I'd be able to sleep on that lumpy mattress at the hotel. When I stepped onto the saloon porch, I heard the hard drum of hoofs and looked down the street to watch a bunch of riders coming toward me. There were five of them, led by a jigger on a white horse.

I couldn't get a look at him till they pulled up in front of the saloon and lamp-light spilled across his face. He was laughing as he swung down, a big, heavy-shouldered feller with a broad face that some folks might have called handsome.

While the other riders were dismounting, this big cuss opened one of his saddlebags and pulled out something white and flimsy looking. He held it up high and waved it around, laughing like mad.

"Boys," he said, "You should have seen her out there in the creek without these fancy drawers on."

The others grinned and one of them said, "Now if that'd been me, Sid, I'd have waited around till she come out."

The one that I knew now was Sid Nanco grinned back at them. "That little hellcat would have stayed in the water all night, and I didn't have much time, so I took her duds and her horse and left her there, cussing and yelling at me."

I stood on the porch, looking at him and getting madder all the time. In my business you get pretty hard. You've got to be or you don't last long. While there's a lot that don't faze you, there's some things you can't stomach. This was one of them.

Stepping off the porch I let Nanco feel the thin edge of my temper. "A man who'd do what you did to that girl ought to have his head beat off."

They were starting across the walk, but now they drew up. Nanco stared at me, like he couldn't believe what he'd heard. Finally he said, "You know who you're talking to, mister?"

"I don't give a damn," I said and hit him in the mouth.

It was a good solid right. It split his lips and sent him staggering back. The rest of the bunch scattered to get out of the way and Nanco slammed into the tie rail, his head snapping back to strike the

nose of his horse. The horse jumped and snorted.

The tie rail kept Nanco from going down. He hung there with his back against it, breathing through his nose, and looking at me while a killing wrath gathered in his eyes. It was plain he wasn't used to this kind of treatment, and from the looks of the others, they weren't either. One of them looked like he was measuring me for a pine box, and said, "Stranger, you hadn't oughta done that."

NANCO didn't say anything, but he moved about as fast as anybody I ever saw. He came in with his head down, the rush forcing me back against the porch railing. He leaned forward, and with me pinned there, began to pump blows into my belly. I didn't like that so I got my hands up over his head, brought both fists down in a savage blow against the back of his neck.

Nanco howled and stopped slugging me in the guts. I let him see a tight smile as I whipped one to the side of his neck and another just above his ear. He floundered around, cursing me, and trying to close in, but he was crazy as hell if he thought I was going to stand there and slug it out with him.

There was some pain in my right hand, but I was getting more satisfaction out of this than I had from anything in years. I took a glancing blow on the side of the head, weaved, and put all my weight behind the next one. Nanco staggered back across the walk, went down and rolled under the hitch rack. A couple of the horses shied and for a minute Nanco was busy trying to stay away from their hoofs.

Coming away from them fast, he banged his head on the rail and this made him madder than he already was. He'd tried to beat me with his fists, but that hadn't worked, so now he made a grab for his gun. All the time he was cursing, calling me a lot of names that I didn't like.

About the time he got his six-shooter clear, I leaped in and kicked it out of his hand, and while I was doing it, the toe of my boot ripped hide off his fingers, skinned them up good. Nanco howled and came lunging at me, swinging wildly. I let him get his hopes up and then I went to work.

Sure, I was taking a chance on busting

up my hands, and for a feller that earns his living with a gun, that's not playing it smart. But every once in a while you meet a bird like this Nanco and you forget everything except how much you want to beat his face in.

And that's what I was doing, using both fists, cutting him down with wicked rights and lefts that turned his face into a red mask. He went down and each time it took him longer to get to his feet. The last time he got to his hands and knees and stayed that way, shaking his head like some big dog. He finally pulled himself up, groggy and leaking blood, and I put him down again. This time I knew he wasn't going to get up for a while.

I stood over him for a minute, breathing hard, and forgetting his pals. That was a mistake, because one of them sneaked up behind me and slammed my head with a gun barrel. I went to my knees, almost falling on top of Sid Nanco. And while I was fighting the pain and waiting for the next blow to put me to sleep, a man's voice cracked through the silence.

"Let's don't gang up on him, boys."

"But hell, Mack," somebody complained. "Look what he done to Sid."

"Yeah," the man called Mack answered. "I saw most of it. Pretty good scrap."

"He cut Sid all to hell."

"Now that's too bad," Mack said. "You boys tote him inside and pour some liquor down him. He'll be all right."

I WAS still on my knees, but now I staggered up and leaned against the porch railing while the Ladder crew picked Sid Nanco up and carried him into the saloon. The one called Mack was standing at the end of the porch and I could see now why Nanco's friends had listened to him. He was wearing a badge and there was a gun in his hand.

My head hurt like hell and I stood there holding it, feeling the lump that was beginning to rise. Now that it was over, I didn't feel so good about whipping Nanco. What had it got me, except some skinned knuckles and a busted head? Besides that, Nanco was foreman for the man that had sent for me. I must be going soft, getting worked up that way because of something that had happened to a girl that didn't mean a damned thing to me.

That's what I was thinking when the man with the badge came over to me. He had holstered his six-shooter and there was a grin on his long, homely face.

"I want to get a look at the gent that gave Sid something he's been needing for a long time," he said pleasantly.

He'd only seen me from a distance, so I lifted my head and let him take a good look.

"A stranger," he said, sobering. "I should of known it wasn't anybody from around here. Nobody left with enough guts to buck Ladder. I'm Mack Spain, the sheriff."

My head felt like it had been kicked by a mule and I kept holding it, wishing he'd stop talking and leave me alone. It was pretty plain, though, that he was going to stick around awhile.

"What's your name?" he asked, watching me closely.

"Cole Bellew."

"Bellew?" He was scowling now.

"You heard me the first time," I said sourly.

"The gunman," Spain said, with a trace of bitterness. "If I'd known who you were I'd have let them beat your damn head in."

I slanted a hard stare at him. "I didn't ask for any help."

While he was chewing on what to say next, I spied a watering trough and staggered over to it. Bending down started my head to whirling and again I cursed myself for the fool stunt I'd pulled. The water wasn't cold but I splashed some of it over my face and when I looked up the sheriff was standing there glaring at me.

"All right, Bellew, start talking."

The water didn't help much. My head was still hurting and I didn't like the tone this badge-toter was using. Drying my face, I said, "Right now I'm going to hit the hay."

His face tightened up. "I want to know what you're doing here?"

"I'm going to the hotel," I told him. "See you tomorrow."

Spain had his boots planted hard in the dust and for a minute I thought he would try to stop me, but when I got close, he changed his mind and stepped aside, muttering something that I didn't catch. When I turned into the hotel, I glanced back



Sid Nanco was firing
as he moved toward me

and he was still standing there, staring after me.

UP IN the room I washed my face and used a wet towel on my head, but when I got through the lump was still there, big as an egg. I took off my boots, my shirt, and too done in to do more than that, sprawled out across the bed. I was just dozing off when somebody rapped on the door, tapped lightly and waited for an answer.

I let them wait, hoping they'd go away, but they didn't. Cursing under my breath, I rolled over and reached for the chair where I'd hung my gunbelt. It wasn't

likely that Nanco would be paying me a visit so soon, but you never can tell. Raised up on one elbow with the gun pointed at the door, I called, "Come in."

I had turned out the lamp, but there was moonlight coming in through the open window, enough to throw a dim glow over the room. Whoever was out in the hall hesitated, like he wasn't too sure of himself, and then opened the door slowly.

"If you're coming in," I growled, "quit fooling around."

The door opened wider and I heard a gasp as the visitor spied the gun in my hand. "Don't shoot, Cole. It's me, Nan Torbet."

I could see who it was now, but with my head hurting like it was, I didn't shout with joy.

"What do you want?" I growled.

She must have seen that I wasn't pleased, but she didn't let on. "I brought your slicker back," she said with a faint smile.

"Couldn't you have waited till tomorrow?"

"I—I didn't think you'd be asleep yet."

She came on into the room and now the moonlight was full upon her. It was the first time I'd seen her with any clothes on. I looked her over, scowling.

She was wearing a skirt and a blouse made of some kind of flimsy material. The skirt was kind of short, and the blouse was pretty low in front. There was a rose in her hair, adding a nice touch, and matching the color of her lips. I stopped scowling and got up off the bed.

If the sight of me with nothing on but my pants bothered her, she sure didn't show it. She just stood there letting me look at her and finally said, low and husky, "After you kissed me today, I just had to see you again."

The way she said it caused my heart to start beating fast. But the pain was still in my head, reminding me of the fight with Nanco, and that it was this little wench who was messing me up. I had a hunch she had something besides romance on her mind.

Instead of reaching for her, I reached for my tobacco sack and said, without looking at her, "You don't want to get all worked up over a little kiss that didn't mean nothing."

That wiped the smile off her face. She stiffened a little. "You mean it was just because I didn't have any clothes—" she faltered, coloring—"because of the way we met?"

"What else?" I said, forcing a sneer into my voice.

"I thought you really liked me."

"Oh hell," I growled, fumbling the cigarette paper. "Will you get out of here and let me get some sleep?"

Her lips were trembling a little as she said, "I was going to offer you a job."

"A job?" My head came up at that. "What are you trying to hand me?"

"I talked it over with Dad and he said I could hire you."

"He must have had a sudden change of heart," I said dryly. "This afternoon he told me to keep away from you."

"He's always suspicious of strangers, but as soon as he cooled off and had a chance to think about it, he was sorry about the way he'd acted."

I sucked on my smoke and looked at her, figuring I knew now her real reason for coming. It made me sore, put heat in my voice as I said, "The setup's pretty clear."

She frowned at me, acting innocent as hell. "I don't know what you mean?"

"Don't give me that," I snarled. "After I left, you and your old man got your heads together, decided that maybe you could use me, that if you turned on a little charm, I'd break my neck going to work for you. But it wasn't me that brought you here. It was my gun."

Anger flared in her eyes. She whirled suddenly toward the door. "I don't care what you think," she said over her shoulder, and slammed the door behind her.

I stood staring at it, mad at her and mad at myself, too.

III

THE NIGHT'S sleep did me a lot of good and after I'd had a bath and a shave, I felt almost human again. I went over to the café and ordered ham and eggs. While I was working on the grub, the door opened and a man dropped onto the stool next to me. It was Mack Spain, the sheriff. He gave me a lopsided grin.

"Head feel better?"

I nodded and went on eating. My head had been too fuzzed up last night to tell what he looked like. Now I saw he was a middle-aged man with square shoulders and a strong jaw. I'd met all kinds, learned to size them up pretty fast. This one struck me as being honest.

He watched me put away the ham and eggs and finally said, "I'm still waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"To find out if you're pulling out of Starbuck this morning."

"I just got here," I said, reaching for my coffee cup.

Spain was frowning. "Then you ain't just passing through?"

"Thought I might stick around a few days."

"That's what I was afraid of." He stared at me hard. "Did Fletcher Ives send for you?"

"You ask too damn many questions, sheriff."

His face got a little red. "It's my job to ask questions, to find out what the deal is when a killer comes to town."

Something tightened inside me, but I didn't raise my voice. "I figure there's a difference between a gunman and a killer."

"They both use guns and the guns fire bullets, lead that cuts a man down." He kept looking at me, his face grim. "I don't want any dead men in my town, Bellew."

"There's always got to be some dead ones if the live ones are going to live in peace," I murmured. "If you had things under control, there wouldn't be any need for a man like me."

"I'm doing all I can," he said defensively. "And I've only been in office two months."

"Unless I miss my guess," I said, "you've got plenty to keep you busy without worrying about me."

"But you coming here could mean that big trouble is ready to break, so I'm going to keep my eye on you, going to watch every damn move you make. You better stay in line, Bellew, because it don't make no difference to me who you are. I'll slap you in a cell."

I finished my coffee and smiled at him, admiring him some and feeling a little sorry for him, too. He was a man who was trying to play it square, trying to enforce the law in a country that was new and raw, trying to do things the legal way, maybe because he believed in something. But he was looking for proof, something that would stand up in court, and his hands were tied.

I'd seen a lot of Mack Spains, men who were bucking long odds. You had to hand it to them, even if you couldn't go along with their way of thinking.

He went out, scowling because he knew there wasn't much he could do about me, except wait to see if I made a slip, and that was something I was always careful about. The coffee was good, so I ordered another cup. While I was sipping it, another feller came in. He looked like one of the boys that had been with Sid

Nanco last night, but I wasn't sure.

He paused beside the cash register long enough to pick up a toothpick and I didn't miss the uneasy glance the cook cast in his direction. With the toothpick stuck in his mouth, he came on down the counter and stopped beside me.

"Mr. Ives is waiting to see you," he said. "Been over at the saloon for about an hour thinking you'd show up."

"Good coffee," I said, swishing it around the cup. "I'll get over after a while."

"Better come now. Mr. Ives don't like to be kept waiting."

"And I don't like to be rushed," I said in a low tone. "Beat it."

His breath sucked in and his face got cold, but he kept his hand away from his gun. After a little bit, he turned around and went out, giving me one last resentful look through the front window.

IT ALWAYS took a lot of java to get me started and this morning I was longer than usual drinking my fill. When I finally left the café, Mack Spain was standing across the street, leaning against an awning post. I could feel his eyes following me all the way to the saloon.

The jigger that had brought me the news was sitting at a card table with a couple of other fellers, making idle talk. When I came in the barroom got quiet. I saw Sid Nanco, who was standing at one end of the bar, turn around and look at me. After the way I'd worked him over, his face wasn't pretty. It got even uglier now, but evidently he knew who I was, so he didn't make any fuss.

Without waiting for me to ask him, the feller in the white apron nodded toward a door at the other end of the bar. I headed that way. The door was marked private, but I opened it and stepped inside, and without turning around, closed the door with a boot heel.

There was a flat-topped desk in the center of the room and a couple of chairs with nobody in them. The room was small with only one window. The window was closed, but a man was standing there looking out, his back to me. He turned around and I had my first look at Fletcher Ives.

Like so often is the case, I didn't like what I saw. A tall man, well over six feet, he was thin as a spider with a bony

face and eyes that reminded me of two balls of tar.

Without making any move to shake hands, he said, "It took you long enough to get here."

"I never get in a hurry," I drawled. "Especially so early in the day."

He walked over to the desk, sizing me up good with those little black eyes of his. "Did you get my check?"

"If I hadn't I wouldn't be here."

The way his temper flared up showed he wasn't used to being talked to this way. "I heard you was a cool one, all right, a feller that can get a job done, and then you come here and start out by working my foreman over."

"He asked for it."

"Maybe he did," Ives said, relaxing a little. "But I can't help wondering if it was a mistake sending for you."

My patience was getting frayed. "If you think so," I snapped, "let's stop wasting time."

He studied me a minute, then said, "We're getting off on the wrong foot. Let's both cool off." He tried to smile and it looked like it hurt him. "I sent you a check for five hundred bucks with the promise of another five hundred when the job is done."

"But you didn't say what the job was, and that's what I'm waiting to hear."

His lips slanted a little with contempt. "Does it make any difference?"

I had to fight like hell to keep from hitting him, but I got hold of myself, and said, "It makes a difference, mister."

"All right. All right. Settle down and I'll tell you what I'm up against." He took a chair back of the desk and nodded toward one across from him.

"I own this valley, Bellew, every damned mile of it and I run a lot of cattle. But I'm not going to have so many if the rustling ain't stopped."

"Rustling?" I said, surprised.

He nodded slowly. There was a dark intense look in his eyes. "I've lost all the cows that I can afford to lose."

"Can't the sheriff stop it?"

"Mack Spain?" Ives made an impatient gesture. "I'm tired of fooling around waiting for him to stop it."

"You've got a pretty big crew," I pointed out. "What's the matter with them doing something?"

Ives hunched forward and looked at me across the desk. "My boys have run themselves ragged, chasing them cow thieves when they had other things to do. They've trailed them into the hills, swapped a little lead, and that's about the size of it."

"No idea who's back of it, huh?"

"I know damned good and well who's back of it," Ives said harshly. "It's an old bird named Torbet."

"Ezra Torbett?" I asked with quick interest.

Ives gave me a sharp stare. "You know the old buzzard?"

"Ran into him on my way here, but he didn't act very friendly." I grinned crookedly. "He told me to stay out of the hills and to keep away from his gal."

"That little filly ain't no better than he is," Ives said with a sneer. "Just the other night one of my boys spotted her riding with her pa and his gang while they were rustling some of my cows."

I hadn't pegged the girl for a thief, but it tied in, and I figured I knew now why Torbet had been up there in the hills with a rifle, and why Nan didn't let me take her all the way home. They had a hideout around there and she didn't want me to find out about it.

"Knowing it's Torbet is one thing," Ives went on. "But getting the goods on him is something else. He's a sly old cuss, always manages to give us the slip. We've cut sign of them a couple of times, but there's a canyon back in those hills where one man with a Winchester can hold off a whole army."

"And so you want me to bring him in?"

Ives nodded, his gaze pinned on my face. "But first I want you to catch him with some of my cows. Get proof and then turn him over to the sheriff."

"What about the stuff he's already rustled?"

"Forget about it. I figure he's selling them to the mining camps, but you don't have to worry about them. There's hardly a night that he don't run off some of my stock, so you shouldn't have much trouble catching him in the act. Try to keep him all in one piece if you can and then there won't be no stink kicked up about it."

I frowned at him. "This sounds more like a job for a detective from the Cattle-men's Association. My word that Torbet

is rustling may not hold much water."

Ives gave me that thin smile again. "I've taken care of that, fixed everything up nice and legal. The stockman's association didn't have a man to send, so they authorized me to pin a badge on one of my own men." He kept smiling while he reached in a desk drawer and brought out a badge which he tossed on the desk.

I picked it up, turning it over in my hand. "Nice and legal, huh?" I murmured.

"That's the way to do things," he said. "Then you don't run into a lot of trouble."

He stood up, studying me for a while without saying anything. Then he asked, "Think you can get the job done?"

"I can try," I said, dropping the badge into my shirt pocket.

When he came around the desk like maybe he was going to shake hands, I turned and left the room, not liking him any better now that the powwow was over. He was thin as a spider and damned if he didn't remind me of a spider, too. But he was offering me a thousand bucks and I've done tougher jobs for less money.

SID NANCO was still standing at the bar, scowling into the whisky glass. He didn't look up, but I had the feeling he was watching me in the bar mirror while I was going out.

As soon as I got through the batwings, I saw Mack Spain leaning against the hitch-rack, working on his nails with a pocket knife. Waiting for me to come out, I thought. Watching and wondering.

"You've got your orders," he said, closing the knife. "Now what?"

I had the badge in my shirt pocket, but I didn't show it to him. "Cheer up, sheriff," I said. "I'm not going to cause you any trouble—not right away, anyhow."

He eyed me like he was trying to read my mind. "Where you heading?"

"Just going for a ride," I told him, innocent as could be. "Want to take a look at the country."

"You don't care a damn about the country."

"I smiled at him, but my voice got serious. 'Don't try following me, sheriff, 'cause I never did like anybody tagging along at my heels. Just set tight and it might be I can stir you up a little business.'"

I left him chewing on that and crossed to the general store where I bought a little grub, some canned beans and sardines, things that wouldn't take much fixing. Then I went down to the livery stable and got my horse.

Riding out across the valley, I spied cattle grazing on the tall grass. They looked fat and healthy with no longhorns or scrub stuff among them. Shorehorns and all wearing the Ladder brand on their flanks. A lot of cattle for one man to own, I thought, and a lot of grass for one outfit to claim.

I rode on, heading toward the hills and I hadn't gone far when I started thinking of Nan Torbet, remembering the way she'd looked in that skirt and blouse when she'd come to my room at the hotel.

I wanted to believe that she had come just to see me, but I wasn't that soft in the head. The best thing I could do now was forget about her, put her out of my mind. She could fire a man's blood all right, but she could cause him to lose his head, too, and in my business you've got to be careful about things like that.

By noon the sun was hot and I was in the hills, scouting around and getting the lay of the land. When I came near the place where I'd brought the girl yesterday, I left my horse in the brush and prowled around on foot to see if I could spot a house or anything. I figured they'd have a lookout, so I was careful not to show myself.

After playing Injun for about an hour, I found the canyon Ives must have been talking about. It ran back into the mountains, a deep gash that looked like it would be plenty hard to get into except through that narrow entrance.

I looked at it from a distance and I could see the slope leading up there, a cleared space that nobody could cross without being seen from the canyon mouth. Sunlight glinting on metal told me there was a lookout in those rocks, ready to pick you off if you got close.

But all I had to do was wait around for Torbet and his bunch to come out. That might take some time but for a thousand bucks you can afford to waste a few days. So I went back to my horse and found a spot where I could watch the canyon without being seen.

The rest of the afternoon I sat in the

meager shade of a cedar, smoking and waiting. I wondered if Nan had known I'd be coming after her old man, if that was why she had offered me the job, hoping to get to me before I saw Fletcher Ives. It was kind of hard to think of the girl as being a rustler, but I knew you never could tell about a woman. I cursed myself then, because here I was thinking about Nan Torbet again.

A little after dark, and just when I was getting restless as hell, a feller rode out of the canyon. He stopped for a minute to talk to the lookout in the rocks and then came on down the slope. When he got closer, I could tell by the floppy brimmed hat that it was Ezra Torbet.

He passed below me, his hand on his gun, playing it real careful. I let him get a good start and then I followed him, figuring maybe I was going to get a break here on this first night.

The moon was up by now so I didn't have much trouble trailing him. I decided, since he was all alone, that he must be going out to get some cows spotted. Then he'd go back after his gang and I'd wait around and round up the whole damned bunch of them.

But all Torbet did when he got down to the valley was stop and look out across it. He stayed there in that one spot for a long time and I stayed in the timber, watching him. Finally he turned around and rode back the way he had come.

IV

THAT'S THE WAY it went for two nights and I was getting tired of fooling. This sneaking around in the brush waiting for something to happen was beginning to wear on my nerves. Both nights there was no sign of the girl or the rest of the gang. Just Torbet riding down to the same spot beside a big boulder and looking out across the valley, but not even going close to any cows.

After sleeping on the ground for two nights, I was ready for that lumpy mattress at the hotel. I wondered if the old cuss had spotted me, and that was why he was laying off the rustling. Whatever was his reason, I had to do something about it, so I could catch him and get this deal over with.

The next day I rode into town and

looked around for Ives, but he wasn't there, so I got back on my horse and headed for his ranch headquarters at the far end of the valley. When I rode in, the Ladder owner was down at the corral watching a peeler take some of the steam out of a snorting bronc.

Ives didn't look any better to me than he had the first time we met, but I tried to keep my dislike from showing when I swung down and walked over to him.

He got his hopes up for a minute. "Catch him?"

I shook my head. "I've trailed him for two nights, but he's been by himself and he hasn't done any cow stealing."

Ives swore softly. "The old buzzard knows you're after him so he's laying off."

"Maybe," I admitted. "Anyway, I want to throw out a little bait for him tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"Have your crew round up some cows," I told him. "Enough prime stuff to make it worth his time, and shove them up there near the hills. Get your boys out of there then, and we'll see what happens."

Ives gave me that thin smile. "You think the temptation will be too much for him, huh?"

"That's what I'm hoping," I said. "Anyway, it's worth a try."

"Sounds like a good idea," Ives agreed. "And if the old cuss makes a try for them, grab him in a hurry, and don't worry about the rest of the gang. If we get him in a cell, it'll put the fear in the others and they'll lay off."

Since that was all I had to talk to him about, I got in the saddle and headed for town. When I passed the barn, I saw Sid Nanco standing in the doorway with a cigarette hanging in one corner of his mouth, his face still swollen and discolored. He turned away from me, but not before I saw the mean look in his eyes.

Late that afternoon I found a good hiding place at the edge of the hills and once more got ready to wait it out. There was a water hole down below me and I could see the cattle that Ives had delivered. Some of them were drinking. They were prime stuff, about twenty-five head. If Ezra Torbet was doing the rustling, like Ives claimed, this ought to make his mouth water.

About an hour after dark, I caught the

faint scrape of a horse's hoof and in a little while I spied a rider as he pulled up over there beside that big boulder where Torbet had been coming the last three nights. For a while he was motionless, looking out across the valley, and I knew he couldn't help but see the cattle, bedded down now for the night. It was a nice setup for a gent that was wanting to do a little rustling.

Pretty soon he lifted his reins and came riding toward the water hole, taking his time and keeping his hand close to his gun like maybe he had a hunch he might be riding into a trap. Before he got too close he stopped and looked all around, wanting to make sure there was nobody with the cattle.

I HAD left my horse back away from the water hole and was hunkering in the brush at the head of a draw, down which I was pretty sure he would come riding. My muscles were tight and I had my gun in my hand. When he passed close to me I held my breath and let him go on because I wanted him to get started with the cattle so there wouldn't be any doubt about it.

He was riding a good horse and he knew how to handle him. In no time at all he had the cattle bunched up and was shoving them back to the draw. They shambled past me with old Ezra urging them on and I could see the pleased smile on his tough old face there in the moonlight.

At first I had figured to step out and tell him to put his hands up, but watching him come closer now, I had a feeling he wouldn't listen to me. He'd make a grab for his gun and I'd have to plug him. I didn't want to kill him. Besides, Ives had said to keep him all in one piece.

I let him get close and then I leaped out of the brush and made a dive for him. He gave a startled yelp and tried to spur out of the way, but I got hold of him and hung on till he finally kicked out of the stirrups and we both hit the ground. I couldn't help admiring the fight he put up, like a damned wild cat, but I got his gun away from him and shoved him up against a bank.

"Don't make me kill you," I said, breathing hard.

He spat out a mothful of dirt and stared

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at me hard. "So, it's you. That damned gunman."

I took the badge out of my shirt pocket and let him take a peek at it. "How come you didn't go back and get the rest of your bunch to give you a hand?" I said.

"I ain't telling you a damned thing," he growled. "Go ahead and shoot me and get it over with."

I grinned at him and shook my head. "All I'm going to do is take you in to jail."

His mouth twisted. "What are you doing, letting that little hunk of tin go to your head?"

"Nope."

"Then what the hell is the deal?"

"The deal is I'm a stock detective and I've caught you stealing another man's cows. That's against the law, so I'm turning you over to the sheriff."

He stared at me searchingly. "From what I've heard about Cole Bellew, he'd rather put a bullet in a man and get it over with."

"You don't want to believe all you hear," I said, and wagged my gun toward

his horse. "We can get along on the way to town or you can get ornery and I'll lay this gun barrel alongside your head and pack you in face down across your saddle. Whichever way you want it."

He cursed me and glanced down like he might be looking for a rock or something he could use on me, but finally he cooled off some and shuffled over to his horse. I got my own mount and we headed for town, riding in silence most of the way. I kept my gun on him and I watched him every minute.

Studying him as we rode along, I could see that he was mulling things over, doing some serious thinking that tightened his mouth and put a trace of bitterness in his eyes. Maybe he was thinking about Nan, wondering what would happen to her now that he was going to jail. That bothered me a little, in spite of what Ives had said about her. Then I cursed. Hell, she'd make out all right.

When we got in sight of Starbuck, Torbet said without looking at me, "So Ives is playing it real careful this time?"

I didn't know what he was driving at and I didn't care. All I wanted to do was turn him over to Spain and collect that five hundred bucks for doing the job. That's what I kept telling myself, but all the time I was halfway wishing I'd never seen this old cuss or his red-lipped daughter.

THERE WAS lamplight in the sheriff's office and when we pulled up out front, I could see Mack Spain sitting back of a big roll-top desk, reading a newspaper. I motioned Torbet inside and followed him. Spain looked up, his mouth falling open. He just sat there, staring until I said, "This is the business I was talking about."

Spain looked at Ezra and then he looked at me. "What's the charge?"

"You know what the charge is," I said. "Lock him up."

Spain scowled at me. "I'm not throwing him in a cell just on your say-so."

I showed him the badge then, held it up and smiled as the lamplight flashed on it. "I'm turning him over to you, but I'll stick around for the trial, and you better see that he's still here when the trial comes up."

I stared at him hard. "I didn't have much trouble getting him, so I've got a hunch you didn't try very hard, sheriff."

The sheriff looked uncomfortable. He was sweating a little. "Now, see here, Bellew. That badge don't give you the right to come in here and start telling me how to run my office."

"Oh, hell," Ezra growled. "Stop all this gabbing, Mack, and lock me up. I want to get some shut-eye."

"He's your prisoner, sheriff," I said, still smiling at him as I laid Torbet's gun on the desk and holstered my own.

Spain was reaching for his key ring when I turned around and went out. Tomorrow I'd collect my other five hundred dollars, but right now what I wanted was a good night's sleep. I was bone tired by the time I got to the hotel, but I didn't close my eyes for a long time.

I just lay there on the lumpy mattress and stared at the ceiling with a sourness laying heavy in my belly. For some reason I couldn't stop thinking about Nan and I wondered how she'd take it when she found out her old man was in jail.

The town was quiet and then I heard a horse moving along the street, but the sound didn't mean anything to me. Finally I went to sleep and I was pounding the pillow hard when something woke me up. The lock on the door, like most cowtown hotel locks, didn't work and I hadn't bothered to put a chair under the knob.

I blinked my eyes a couple of times and felt something digging into my ribs, something round and hard that I didn't need to see to know it was a gun. For a minute I didn't move, just lay there with ice in my belly. Then a woman's voice, low and tight, said, "Come on. Wake up."

I turned my head slowly and looked at her while the gun pressed hard against my side. Nan Torbet was standing there beside the bed, moonlight showing me the determined set of her face.

"You're the damndest woman," I said, forcing a smile, "for beaking up a feller's sleep."

She stepped back and motioned with the gun. "Get up and put your clothes on. We're going for a ride."

I shook my head. "I've had all the riding I want for a while.

THIS TIME she was wearing men's clothes, Levis and boots, a black stetson and a blue workshirt. I was more interested in the gun she was holding than anything else. It was a forty-five, a big gun for her little hand, but it didn't wobble and I had a feeling she knew how to use it.

"I'd just as soon put a bullet in you as not," she said.

I stopped trying to smile and glanced at my gunbelt hanging on a chair. It wasn't far and when I got up, maybe I could make a grab for it. She must have read my mind because she stepped over real quick and lifted the gun.

"You're going to be shocked," I said. "I haven't got anything on but my drawers."

Her face colored a little, but she got my pants off the chair and threw them at me. "Put them on and don't fool around about it."

I shrugged and swung my legs over the side of the bed. She colored some more, but the gun in her hand was as steady as ever.

While I was pulling on my boots, I said, "You found out about your old man, huh?"

"Yes, I found out. When he didn't come home, I got worried and went looking for him." Her mouth got a little tighter. "You must be pretty proud of yourself after what you've done."

I got my boots on and reached for my shirt, scowling at her. "Don't give me that high and mighty stuff, sis. You knew about the rustling, and it's a lucky break that you and the rest of the gang aren't in jail along with him. You, living up here with a pack of outlaws, helping them steal another man's cows, and you've got the gall to come here and throw it in my face because I caught your old man and put him where he belongs."

"My father isn't a rustler and you know it."

I laughed at that, a harsh, dry sound. "Maybe you've got a better name for it?"

She stood there, stiff and straight in the moonlight, her breasts straining against the front of that blue shirt. "There is such a thing as retribution," she said.

"Don't hand me a lot of fancy talk," I

told her. "Your old man is the leader of a gang of cow thieves and that's all there is to it. Now why the hell don't you get out of here and let me get some sleep?"

"Do you think I can sleep as long as my father's in that jail?"

"You must have known that was where he'd end up, sooner or later," I said impatiently. "Now what do you think you're going to do with me? Take me out and let the rest of the gang work me over? Is that what you've got in mind?"

She stared at me searchingly. "You really think there is a gang, don't you?"

"I saw your lookout up there," I said. "So quit trying to play innocent with me."

She wagged the gun toward the door.

"We're going to take a ride because I want to show you something. It probably won't make any difference to a no-good killer like you, but I want you to take a look so you'll have something to remember every time you see yourself in a mirror."

V

I STILL figured she was handing me a line, but she was holding all the cards, so there wasn't much I could do but go along. She marched me down the back stairs where she had two horses tied to the rear of the hotel. One of them looked like the cayuse her old man had been riding and which I had left at the livery stable. She told me to climb on and head down the alley.

There wasn't any talk as we rode toward the hills, just the sound of our horse's hoofs. Nan rode a little behind me and every time I glanced back I could see the gun lined on my back. I swore under my breath, wondering what she had cooked up for me when we got to the hideout. I figured it must be something pretty good, a nice little scheme to get revenge for what I'd done to her dad.

By the time we got to the canyon where the lookout was, I had made up my mind that if I wanted to save my neck I'd better try something before she got me in there where her gang was waiting. I guess she'd waved some sort of a signal to the man in the rocks because he didn't cut down on us.

When we reached the mouth of the

canyon, the feller stood up in the rocks. He was a skinny yahoo holding a rifle, but I couldn't see his face very well in the dark. He called down, "Who's that with you, Nan?"

"Cole Bellew, Willie," Nan told him. "That gunman Dad told you about."

"Did you see anything of Ezra?" Willie asked anxiously.

"I couldn't find him," Nan answered. "So I rode into town and found out from the sheriff that he's got Dad in jail. Spain claims that Bellew caught Dad with some of Ives's cattle."

The man called Willie swore aloud. "That damned gunslinger."

I wasn't looking at Willie. I had my eyes on Nan because she was close to me and the gun had sagged a little while she talked to the lookout. It was now or never, I told myself and made a grab for her. I got one hand on her arm and I had a glimpse of Willie bringing his rifle up. I figured if I could get hold of her it would keep Willie from shooting, but Nan kicked me under the chin and as I was staggering back, Willie cut loose with his carbine.

The bullet struck me alongside the head and I felt myself falling, going down into a deep dark pit. . . .

When I came out of it I was lying on some blankets that had been spread on a dirt floor. I couldn't figure it out at first and my head hurt too bad to think about it. All I knew for sure was that Nan was bending over me, bathing my face. The last time I'd seen her she'd been holding a gun on me, so I told myself I was imagining things, and then I went back to sleep.

It was daylight when I woke up again and my head didn't hurt so bad now. I looked up and saw there was a roof over my head and made out the log walls of a house. Then I turned my head a little and saw the girl again. She wasn't bathing my head this time but she was still sitting beside me and I had the feeling she'd been there all night.

"One minute you're holding a gun on me," I muttered, "and the next thing I know you're playing nursemaid."

There were lines in her face and she looked tired, but she seemed to stiffen a little now that I was awake. "I'd do as much for a mangy coyote," she said coolly.

I winced, but I had the impression she

was laying it on a little thick, that she was trying mighty hard to get it across that she hadn't changed her mind about me.

"Why didn't you let your friend Willie finish me off?" I asked, fingering the bandage on my head.

"We're not murderers," she retorted. "Willie wouldn't have shot you in the first place if you hadn't made a grab for me. Anyway, the bullet just grazed your head. You'll be all right."

"Still trying to give me that innocent act," I said with a sneer.

SHE STOOD up suddenly and glared down at me. "I should have put a bullet in you back at the hotel. You're no better than Ives and Nanco and the rest of those killers."

I raised up on one elbow and since that didn't start my head pounding, I stayed there and looked at her, frowning. "What was your real reason for bringing me here?"

"I told you," she said. "I wanted you to see the kind of outlaws that live here." Her voice got harsh. "Come on and get up. You're big and tough. A little lead can't hurt you. Go over to that window and look out. Take a good long look at those outlaws out there."

I looked over at the window. It didn't have any glass in it and I could tell that the house had been built in a hurry. A small place with a dirt floor, a brush roof and just that one window. I got up, a little shaky at first, and staggered over to it and leaned against the wall while I looked out.

I could see the high gray walls of the canyon and a half a dozen shacks along the floor of it. They had that thrown-together look like this one, built on ground that was rocky and barren. There wasn't a tree or anything green as far as I could see. Just those shacks and the harsh sun beating down on them.

I saw men, women and kids moving around out there, people that had a beaten look about them. The men wore overalls and had the appearance of cowmen, family men instead of tough, hard-bitten rustlers.

I swung back to Nan, stared at her in puzzlement. "I don't get it."

Her eyes searched my face and suddenly she was no longer angry. "You didn't know the real story, did you, Cole? I started to tell you that first night at the hotel, but after the way you talked I didn't think it would make any difference."

"All I know," I said, "is what Ives told me, that your old man and his bunch were rustling him blind."

"But he didn't tell you why, that two years ago we came into the valley and settled on land under the homestead act. It was land that Ives had always claimed, but no longer had any right to. My father and his neighbors are cattlemen, not farmers, and they weren't bothering Ives. But he's a hog, a man who couldn't stand to see somebody else come into his valley. So he brought in gunmen, a lot of them, and they burned us out, ran off our stock."

"Why didn't you go to the sheriff?"

"At that time Ives controlled the local law and there was nothing we could do. So we came here, and to pay Ives back, we've been stealing some of his cattle, but part of them were cattle that belonged to us in the first place. We've sold the cattle to get food because you can't raise anything here in the rocks."

I kept looking at her. "So, that's what you meant by retribution?"

"Oh, I knew it wasn't right, in spite of what Ives had done, and I tried to talk Dad out of it, tried to get him to take it to court after Mack Spain was elected. But Dad was bitter, said we wouldn't stand a chance, and the others agreed with him."

I glanced out the window, listening to a bunch of kids hollering as they chased a long-eared hound dog across the barren ground. There was a little girl among them and I saw she was clutching a rag doll in her arms. When I looked back at Nan there was a tightness in my throat.

"And you came to my room that first night because you were desperate, because you were willing to do anything to help your dad and these people." I was talking to myself more than I was to her.

She stood there looking at me. Her eyes didn't waver. "I never went to a man's room like that before."

SHE WAS giving it to me straight, and knowing that didn't make me feel good after the way I'd treated her. I glanced out the window again, mostly because it was hard to look at her. I heard her saying, "Dad told me you were a gunman, a man who did a job for a price, that you had come to work for Ives, but after the way you kissed me that day, I couldn't believe you were all bad."

She stopped talking and it got quiet in the room, so damned still that all I could hear was those kids playing outside, around the hard, sun-baked ground. I looked down at the blankets where I'd lain during the night. There was a spot of blood at one corner and I stared at it, thinking that she'd brought me here, patched me up and taken care of me, after what I'd done to her.

Suddenly I had to get out of there, as far away from those folks as I could. Nan was still looking at me, but she didn't say anything when I turned and crossed to the door. Then when I reached it and was starting out, she said, "Here's your gun."

She had picked it up and was holding it out to me, her eyes a little misty now, her lips trembling. "You can take Dad's horse," she said. "He's out back."

Some of the folks watched me while I saddled up and I saw the resentment in the eyes of the men, but nobody made a move to stop me. Cursing under my breath, I got the hell out of there.

There was a five hundred dollar check in my pocket, the one Ives had sent me, and I had another five hundred coming. I thought about the money and my mouth twisted. . . .

I was almost to town when I heard a horse coming behind me, hoofs drumming hard on the trail. I hipped around and saw that it was Nan, bent low and whipping the horse with the loose ends of her reins. She was bareheaded, her hair streaming out behind her. I pulled up and waited for her to reach me.

"I hoped I could catch you," she said breathlessly. "Before the others got to town."

"What's up?"

"Willie Mason has gotten the others

together and they're coming to break Dad out of jail."

"I reckon that's about the only way you can get him out."

She looked pale and scared. "But they'll be killed, all of them. They're not gunmen. They're just men with their backs to the wall, men with wives and kids to think about. I tried to tell them that Ives will have his crew in town, that they won't stand a chance, but they wouldn't listen."

A dust cloud rose up behind her and she looked at it, the fear growing in her eyes. "Can't you do something?" she pleaded.

The way she said it, that look in her eyes, got me. I told her to stay out of town and I left her there and rode on.

When I came to Starbuck, I could see the line of Ladder horses at the rack in front of the saloon. The street looked deserted, but there was something in the air, something deadly. I could feel it as I rode past the rail and then I caught a flash of sunlight on a gun barrel. I couldn't see the man but I knew he was on the roof of a building across from the jail.

I went on, my insides tight as I searched the roofs and the doorways of the other buildings. The crown of a man's hat was showing as he crouched behind the false front on top of the general store.

There were others, men I recognized as part of the Ladder crew. A couple of them were in the alley across from the jail and three more were standing in doorways, keeping back, out of sight.

One of them was Sid Nanco, checking the loads in his gun when I went past. He just gave me a bleak stare. There was no sign of Ives, so I figured he was in the saloon, waiting there for his men to spring the trap.

IVES was the only customer at the bar. He had one foot on the rail and he was drinking a beer. When I came in he glanced around and said, "Where the hell have you been?"

"Finding out about you," I said thinly. "Learning what a damned no-good hog you really are."

He started to reach for his gun but mine was already in my hand.

"What the hell's happened to you?" he growled.

There wasn't time for a lot of talk, so I lifted his gun, and said, "Come on, mister, you're going out and call them gun wolves of yours off before they start throwing lead."

"I don't know what you're driving at."

"The hell you don't," I said flatly. "I got the old man for you and you knew all along that if you could put him in jail his friends would try to bust him out. That would give you a good excuse to kill all of them, fix it so you could say your men were just trying to stop a jailbreak. Come on, damn you: Get moving or I'll put a slug in your guts right here."

His face was slick with sweat as he moved toward the batwings.

"So you're the great Bellew, the tough hombre I was offering a thousand dollars to," he said sneeringly.

"I'll keep the five hundred you already paid me," I said, prodding him in the back. "I figure I earned that much."

"But what the hell's eating on you, anyway?"

"There's some deals I can't stomach, mister, and this one stinks to high heaven."

I marched him down the street toward the jail while beyond the town that dust cloud was coming closer. Torbet's friends would be here in a minute.

"All right, Ives," I said grimly. "Call out nice and loud to your boys, tell them you've changed your mind."

He stopped, then moved suddenly, whirling and ramming me with his shoulder. At the same time he yelled, "Sid, get him."

I was knocked off balance and by the time I could set myself, Ives had plunged down an alley. I started to follow, but a bullet smacked into the building close to my head, and I saw Sid Nanco coming down the walk, firing as he moved toward me.

I stepped away from the building and threw a quick shot that ripped splinters from the plank walk under his feet. That failed to stop him, but I got the next shot up, put it right into his chest, and he stopped trying to reach me.

He staggered out into the street, kicking up the dust before he sprawled across a watering trough. From the way he was

hanging there I knew he was dead.

The rest of the Ladder crew were coming out of their hiding places now, looking around and trying to decide what to do. They were out in the open now where Torbet's friends could see them. I had a glimpse of Nan, riding with the others down the middle of the street, and then I whirled and ran down the alley after Ives.

He had stopped at the far end, waiting there like he figured Nanco would nail me. When he saw me coming he ducked back out of sight and I heard the pound of boots. He wasn't armed so I took out after him, reached the back alley and went tearing along it. I had a glimpse of him as he cut back to the street, taking a passageway between the saloon and the building next to it.

When I reached the front of the saloon, the batwings were still swinging, so I knew he had gone in there. I wasn't far behind him, in time to see him vault over the bar. The apron saw him coming and got out of there in a hurry.

I guess Ives knew where the bartender kept his shotgun. He ducked down and I knew he was reaching for a scattergun. I let him try to bring it up and then I shot through the front of the bar, emptied my gun, and stood there waiting. I heard the shotgun hit the floor and then the heavier sound of Ives's body.

The bartender, his face the color of skimmed milk, looked down at the floor

and moaned, "My God, look at him!"

I didn't bother to look. I knew he was dead, so I turned around and went outside. The Ladder crew, without Nanco or Ives to give them orders, had held their fire and now they were going for their horses.

Nan and her friends were outside the jail, when I pushed past them and went inside. Mack Spain, looking worried, met me at the door.

"What's been going on out there, Bellew?"

"A little shooting," I told him. "Ives and Nanco are dead."

"You killed them?"

"Yeah, but it was self-defense."

He wasn't going to argue with me. "What about Ezra Torbet?"

"I was mistaken about those being Ladder cows he had," I said, keeping a straight face. "And now that Ives isn't around to make any charges, I guess you'll have to let him go."

Spain said he'd be mighty glad to do that and, for the first time, looked at me with warmth in his eyes.

Folks were beginning to crowd into the office, so I figured now was the time to get out of there. I got through the door all right, but Nan was there blocking the way.

She was smiling and what I saw in her eyes was worth a lot more than the five hundred bucks I had tossed away.



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"You're under arrest,
Ristine!" Kern said



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Exciting Western

The Marshal of Goldfork

A Novel by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

I

SPRING thaws had belatedly released the grip of snow drifts from the Mother Lode wagon roads, and up from Sacramento a Wells Fargo stage thrust deep into the High Sierras, spearheading the first influx of the year's traffic to the gold camps.

Ahead of the mud-spattered Concord and the freight wagons queued in its ruts, the news sped from camp to

*The wounded lawman of the tough mining camp swore he'd
come back with a coffin—for the loser. . . .*

camp and from claim to claim, to reach the end-of-trail boom town at Goldfork a day in advance of the coach's arrival.

A motley army of jackleg muckers converged on the town strung out along the gulch of Beardog Creek, massing in front of the Wells Fargo station to welcome the first freight and mail in five snowbound months. And in the privacy of his saloon office over the Jackpot Saloon, Happyjack Ristine oiled and loaded his Dragon .45s for the first time that winter, cursing himself for a fool.

Zeno Malone, albino-haired bartender and Ristine's right-hand man, stood at the window overlooking Goldfork's main street and sensed the electric tension which gripped the waiting miners below. Perhaps he alone had an inkling of the strain Ristine was undergoing today, in the tense period of waiting for destiny to arrive on the first stagecoach of the year.

The acknowledged gun boss of Goldfork, Ristine was a man with few friends and no confidants, a gambling man who rarely carried guns but who paid well for the loyalty and straight shooting of his underlings.

"Kern won't be aboard that stage, you can bet your last blue chip on that, Boss," Malone commented tentatively, turning his rabbit-pink eyes toward Ristine as the gambler attempted to flex the useless tendons of his bullet-ruined right hand. He's either dead or paralyzed, and you know it. I—I never seen you spooked like this before, Happyjack."

The quick anger in Ristine's eyes silenced the bartender, made the albino regret his impetuous remark. A man didn't doubt Happyjack Ristine's courage, or if he did he kept the heresy to himself.

"You don't know Jubal Kern," Ristine said, and buckled on his gun harness under the fustian tails of his steelpen coat.

NO ONE in Goldfork had taken Jube Kern's farewell threat too seriously, that snowy night last November when the boom-camp marshal had left the diggings with Ristine's derringer bullet imbedded in his back, vanishing into the teeth of a blizzard that was the first harbinger of winter to the Southern Mines.

"Look for me back on the first stage next spring, Ristine!" the wounded law-

man had vowed, propping himself up on the warped pine door which had been laid across the stage-coach seats in lieu of a stretcher. "I'm leaving my law badge in your saloon so you won't forget I aim to show up again and finish this thing. And I'll bring a coffin back with me when I come—for the loser."

Happyjack Ristine, the snowflakes stark on his black Dundreary whiskers, and his right arm cradled in a sling, had nodded and given the only answer a boom camp gunboss could have given in front of the awed crowd:

"Goldfork carries all the law it needs on its hip, Kern. But your tin star will be waiting for you. And about that coffin—make sure you order a long one, Marshal. You're a tall man."

At which the express jehu, with an anxious eye canted to the storm clouds racking over the sugar pines to westward, had larruped his Morgans down the muddy street and vanished into the thickening limbo that presaged a November blizzard . . .

Roundsiding about it later over gaming tables and along the various saloon bars in Goldfork, the miners who were working the placer claims over the winter were unanimous on one thing. Jube Kern wouldn't be back, his vow to the contrary.

More than likely the blizzard would trap the Wells Fargo Concord before it reached the Sierra foothills, in which case the driver and shotgun guard would be lucky to escape with their own lives. Then there was the .41 pellet which Happyjack Ristine's sleeve gun had sent smashing into the marshal's side.

According to Sawbones McGuffy, the local medico, Ristine's bullet had lodged in the marshal's backbone. Even if gangrene didn't get him, Jube Kern was doomed to spend the rest of his days paralyzed from the waist down.

That had been five months ago, a hiatus during which Goldfork had been isolated from California and the outside world.

Braver tongues, made foolhardy by overindulgence in rotgut whisky, had gossiped vaguely about the two Chileno bushwhackers Happyjack Ristine purportedly had sent to trail Kern's stage. That, they said, had been to make sure the wounded marshal didn't get to San Francisco.

Maybe Ristine had done that; maybe not. Two of his Chileno bouncers at the Jackpot Saloon had never been seen since the night of the blizzard. That much was fact.

Kern had left a memento of his last shoot-out in Goldfork. His bullet, fired in self-defense while in the act of arresting the Jackpot owner for defying the camp's gun-toting law, had ruined the gambler's right hand for keeps. It was problematical whether Kern had lived to reach the surgeons in Frisco who had the skill to probe out the derringer slug in his spine.

No one in Goldfork, Zeno Malone least of all, would ever forget how Marshal Jube Kern had dragged his paralyzed body across the barroom floor, after Ristine had fled to the sanctuary of his upstairs office. A pig-tailed Chinese swamper had helped the wounded lawman to his feet at the door and, in sight of all, Kern had unpinned the law badge from his mackinaw.

Ristine had vowed publicly that he would force Kern to surrender that star. It had been bestowed upon the lawman by the Miners' Law & Order Committee two years before, when Goldfork was fast becoming the wildest gold camp in the Mother Lode.

BUT Jube Kern's gesture had been a symbol of defiance rather than surrender. With his flagging strength, the marshal had stuck the tin star on the breast of the cigar-store Indian by the doorway, an effigy dubbed Helldorado Harry by the saloon customers.

"Tell Ristine—I'll be back—to get that star," Kern had said, before the Chinese swamper carried him over to Sawbones McGuffey's shanty on the gulch rim.

And the law badge of Goldfork camp had remained where Kern had pinned it, on Helldorado Harry's cedarwood brisket, through the long winter months which followed.

Even after the bandages had been removed from his bullet-butchered gun hand, Happyjack Ristine had elected to leave the badge where it was. It made a curio that appealed to the morbid element in the diggings, attracting trade to the Jackpot. It was a tangible monument, too, to the fact that Ristine had lived up to his boast that no Miner's Committee

marshal would ever enforce his gun-toting law in the Jackpot Saloon.

So Helldorado Harry, the wooden statue with a tomahawk in one fist and a bunch of wood-carved cigars in the other, had been Goldfork's only marshal following Kern's departure. It was taken for granted that the wounded lawman would never return to claim his badge.

"The grapevine says a caravan of freight wagons are following the express coach, Boss," Zeno Malone spoke up, bridging the awkward silence which had fallen between them. "They crossed the upper fork of the Stanislaus around sundown last night. You ain't got long to wait—to find out the worst."

Happyjack Ristine moved to the window, scowling down at the jostling throng of bearded and mackinaw-clad men who had been drawn to the camp from near and far.

There were husbands and fathers in that shaggy multitude who would get their first mail from home and loved ones since snow had started to fly. There were businessmen who had seen the long winter deplete their stock, and who were awaiting shipments of flour and drygoods and tools and ammunition in the loaded Conestogas which rumor said were on their way.

Ristine himself had a mercenary interest in the arrival of the first freighters from the valley, for the Jackpot's bar, like its rival establishment, had been as dry as an old boot for going on six weeks now. Zeno Malone had a dozen barrels of whiskey coming, for which a host of thirsty miners would part with a substantial portion of their winter's dust by nightfall.

Somewhere down the gulch a shotgun boomed in signal. Jubilant shouts came relaying up to the boom camp, kindling a frenzy in the close-packed men waiting at the Wells Fargo barn.

From his elevated lookout in the upper-story window of the Jackpot, Ristine caught sight of a mud-camouflaged Concord rounding the gulch road half a mile below, a team of Morgans straining at the tug straps to pull the season's first stage through the hub-deep mire.

Behind lumbered the canvas-hooded freight wagons drawn by tandem-hitched mules.

"Get out there and be ready to make a

cash bid in case some speculator has a stock of liquor to auction off, Zeno," Ristine ordered his chalk-skinned bartender. "We'll need all the firewater we can get. This will be the most hell-roaring night in Goldfork's history, mark my word on that!"

Following Malone down the stairs from the mezzanine gambling cubicles to the main barroom, Happyjack Ristine caught the glitter of the law badge on the cigar-store Indian, reflected like a planet in the backbar mirror. Since Jube Kern had imbedded the emblem in the statue's chest against this fateful day, its nickeled surface had been furbished to glittery brilliance by uncounted sleeves that had rubbed it for good luck.

FROM an iron strong-box under the bar counter, Ristine took a bottle of rye which had not been placed on public sale. It was the last good whisky remaining in the drought-ridden camp. He poured himself a stiff dram, threw back his head and tossed the fiery drink down his gullet at a single gulp.

"He won't be on that stage," Ristine whispered to his image in the backbar glass. His numb, twisted fingers shook, dropping the whisky glass with a tinkling crash at his feet. "Kern was dead before he hit Sacramento."

The stage-coach was creaking to a halt across the street when Ristine shouldered through the swing doors and leaned against an awning post on the Jackpot porch.

Reddish Sierra mud had completely stoppered the spokes of the Concord's wheels. The coach jounced on its bullhide thoroughbraces as the passengers began to alight here at road's end. Ristine's pulses upped their tempo as he watched the travelers climb out, ticking them off one by one.

Three dudes from the States, come to El Dorado to seek their fortunes in the gold fields. A portly drummer for a Los Angeles beef rancho. Old Ike Gration, the truant wheelwright who had let winter catch him on a trip down below. And that was all. The Concord door swung shut of its own weight.

Pent-up breaths sighed through the crowd. Jubal Kern had not made good on his vow to return on the spring's first

stage. It had been a dying man's brag, a face-saving gesture on the part of a lawman who had been unable to tame California's toughest gold camp.

A hundred pairs of eyes swiveled to catch Happyjack Ristine's reaction. But the gambler's narrow face was inscrutable, showing neither relief nor vindication. The mask of a gambler in perfect control of himself.

Ristine took a Cuban cheroot from his flowered waistcoat and bit off the end, jabbing the black weed in his teeth and fumbling with the stiff fingers of his game hand in a pocket of his steelpen coat for flint and steel. In the act of lighting the cigar, Ristine froze, eyes narrowed in stunned disbelief as he stared over the heads of the throng.

The Concord's mud-spattered door swung open and a tall figure in moleskin pants, beaver hat, and red-checkered mackinaw stood poised on the iron step, as if drinking in a familiar scene before alighting from the vehicle.

"Jube Kern! The marshal's come back to Goldfork!"

The whisper passed from lip to lip until the chant reached Ristine's ears.

"And he's brought a coffin with him. Damned if he ain't!"

II

FOR the first time, the street mob took notice of the long black box lashed to the roof of the Concord. From its sinister dimensions and the off-square angles of its side walls, it could be mistaken for nothing but a grave casket.

Spring sunlight threw harsh shadows across the gaunt face of the marshal, revealing the stamp of past suffering there, revealing a pallor gained from long months in a hospital. That ordeal had threaded the young giant's thick brown hair with a sprinkle of silver.

Then Kern stepped down into the ankle-deep ooze, his towering figure looming head-high above the throng as his sour gaze raked the sea of familiar faces.

An aisle spread in the press of bodies then. An aisle which angled across the street to the steps of the Jackpot Saloon where Happyjack Ristine stood transfixed beside a porch post.

Jube Kern, walking with a slight limp

which hadn't been there half a year ago, headed toward Ristine's saloon. His eyes held the vacant, off-focus stare of a man who had come to the end of a long and grueling journey.

"Hey, Mr. Kern!" the Wells Fargo driver called after him, whipping his lines around the jacob staff and standing up in the stage boot. "Where do you want this here coffin took?"

Kern halted, turning slowly to regard the Wells Fargo man.

"Oh! Unload it at Colton's Gold Exchange, will you, Jeb? You'll need two-three men to help you. It's heavy."

Happyjack Ristine, his usual florid countenance bleached ashen behind purling cigar smoke, unbuttoned his Prince Albert to expose the polished buckles of twin gunbelts. The Marshal of Goldfork climbed the saloon steps and paused at arm's length from the gambler.

Converging waves of humanity closed in the gap in the crowd, the churning sound of hobbled boots in the mud being the only noise that disturbed the gelid quiet.

"I've come for my badge, Happyjack."

The cheroot twitched between Ristine's clamped teeth. He jerked his head toward the slatted half-doors.

"It's where you left it, Marshal."

Boots thudded on the plank floor of the porch as the crowd pressed in, eyes riveted on the two enemies who stepped into the barroom. The doors fanned behind them, but they could tell that Jube Kern had halted before the hawk-faced wooden statue of Helldorado Harry.

Knots of muscle flicked under Ristine's sable Dundrearys as he watched the marshal tug the nickel-plated star from the cigar-store Indian and pin it to the fabric of his mackinaw lapel.

There were elements of melodrama in Kern's act, but the marshal's clean-shaven face held no hint of bravado as he wheeled to face the saloonkeeper at his elbow.

"How many killings," he asked bluntly, "have there been in Goldfork since I went below, Ristine?"

The gambler flicked ash from the glowing tip of his cheroot, eying the lawman with the queer musing of a man who would never make the mistake of underestimating an adversary.

"Suppose we put our cards on the table,

Jube," he proposed finally. "You and I had our differences in the past. I figure neither of us has anything to gain by—"

"You claimed Goldfork didn't need a lawman!" Kern cut in. "You've had five months to prove it, Ristine. There was an average of a killing a week in your saloon alone before the Miners' Law and Order Committee appointed me marshal. I trimmed that figure considerable. Now I aim to find out if the diggings tamed down of its own accord while I was away. If all this needless bloodshed tapered off, maybe you're right. Maybe Goldfork don't need a marshal."

RISTINE sucked at his cheroot thoughtfully, stalling for time. Finally he held out his withered hand. Livid with scar tissue and knobby with poorly knitted bones, it showed the marshal where his bullet had wrecked the hand beyond repair.

"Frisco patched you up as good as ever, Kern," the gambler said evasively. "As you see, I'll carry your brand as long as I live. Don't you figure our accounts are evened up? Ain't Goldfork big enough to hold the two of us?"

Jube Kern leaned an elbow against the wooden Indian, easing the weight off his hip. It would never be quite right again, despite the miracle of surgery that had removed Ristine's bullet from Jube's spinal column and patched up the damaged nerves there.

At thirty-five, Kern had suffered tortures, and the mark of that agony had added ten years to his appearance. But his level eyes had lost none of their candor, his brain none of its rare understanding of what made men tick.

Staring at Happyjack Ristine now, Kern did not make the error of assuming that his sworn enemy was going soft, yielding to the pressure of public opinion. Ristine was volunteering a truce between them, knowing even as he spoke, that Goldfork was not big enough for both of them, and never would be again.

"It goes far deeper than mere personal hatred between the two of us, Ristine," the marshal argued grimly. "It's the wild element you represent, the hoodlums who have given Goldfork its reputation for being a stinkhole of outlawry."

"But I give my customers what they—"

"Let me finish, Ristine. The decent citizens of this camp have paid me to stamp out the gun law you represent. I didn't come back into the Mother Lode country to accept any compromises with you or any of your stripe."

Cold lights flickered in the gambler's hooded eyes. He hunched his big shoulders inside the fustian steelpan, recognizing the lawman's ultimatum and electing to stand pat.

"What do you aim to do first, Marshal?" he inquired coldly.

CHINESE HERDERS



CHINESE prospectors on the frontier in early-day Idaho were often the victims of unscrupulous white men who openly jumped their mining claims. Being Chinese—and heathens to boot—they had no recourse in the courts of law.

Therefore, the celestial miners retaliated by hiring white men to jump their claims for them! These hired men would sit on the various properties and assert them as their very own. With professional claim-jumpers thus discouraged, the Chinese could then work their claims in safety.

A man who thus hired himself out to a Chinese miner was called a "Chinese herder."

—Norman Renard

Jube Kern reached in a pocket of his mackinaw and drew a folded cardboard placard. Without comment, he handed it to Ristine. It was a duplicate of the poster which Kern had had printed over in Sonora and tacked on walls and fence posts around Goldfork the previous fall.

NO GUNTOTING IN GOLDFORK!

Effective at sundown this date, it will be ille-

gal for any citizen of Goldfork and vicinity to carry weapons, concealed or otherwise, while inside the limits of the camp. Rifles, pistols and shotguns will be checked with the undersigned at the Goldfork jailhouse on Nugget Street upon entering town, and will be redeemable upon departure. The above ruling applies to black-jacks, brass knuckles, shot-loaded quirts and all knives measuring six inches or more in overall length. Violation of this rule will result in arrest and jury trial by the Goldfork Miners' Law & Order Committee.

(Signed) JUBAL KERN,
Camp Marshal

"I'm posting another batch of these notices at once, Ristine," Kern said. "Enforcing this gun-toting law will cut down killings and street fights overnight."

Ristine handed the poster back to the marshal, hitching his own gunbelts arrogantly. Kern pushed through the batwings to face the crowd on the porch outside.

"I'll be at my office in the jailhouse two hours before the sunset deadline, Ristine," the marshal said pointedly. "I'll expect you to drop around and check that hardware of yours or face the consequences. You might pass the word along to your customers."

Kern paused to pry a pair of rusty tacks from a bulletin board on the clapboard wall of the Jackpot, and tack his printed ultimatum thereon with the handle of his jackknife.

Then the marshal limped down the steps and pushed off through the crowd, acknowledging greetings of old friends with curt nods. The law had come back to Goldfork to stay.

BEHIND Kern, the throng crowded around the sign, educated miners in the forefront reading Kern's declaration of war against the camp's owlhoot element, for the benefit of the illiterates.

"Why, Kern's as good as signed his own death warrant!" spoke up a bearded hard-rock miner. His sixgun, strapped in plain sight outside his buffalo coat, had notches filed conspicuously on the backstrap. "I'm damned if I'll give up my hogleg for no marshal, and to hell with the Law and Order Committee!"

A rumble of mixed comment followed the miner's outburst.

"Kern is calling for showdown—I agree with you there, Troll," vouchsafed Sol Kreidler, owner of the Okay Mercantile

Store. "But as a charter member of the Committee, I'm telling you a gun-toting law is one thing this camp has got to have. I aim to check my forty-four with the marshal."

Calling at the Wells Fargo office, Jube Kern claimed his carpet-bag from the agent. Then he headed up Nugget Street and turned in at the familiar brick building which the Miners' Law & Order Committee had built to serve as a jail. Kern's sleeping quarters were in a lean-to behind the calaboose.

Old memories stirred the marshal as he unlocked the door of his shanty. Nothing had been disturbed during his half-year's absence. The framed photograph of Vola Colton still stood on the table by his bunk, a cherished Christmas gift which he would have pawned his soul to have had with him at the hospital in 'Frisco to ease the monotony of his convalescence.

He stood staring at the girl's tintype likeness for a long minute, then inhaled deeply and tossed his bag on the bunk.

Taking a ring of brass keys from his pocket, he unlocked the jail and gave the cell block and his office a leisurely inspection. Obviously, the building had not been opened during his absence—a fact which did not surprise him, inasmuch as he had left town with the only set of jail keys.

On the other hand, the Committee could have had Saleratus Burke, the local locksmith, make a new set of keys if the camp had actually needed the jail. On the face of it, it would seem that Goldfork had no need for a bastille to house its wrongdoers, much less a marshal.

Leaving the jail with a bundle of printed placards and a tack hammer under his arm, Kern headed back to the main street. He crossed over to Gideon Colton's Gold Exchange, a squat brick structure with barred windows and a corrugated iron roof. Colton's was the bank where miners weighed in their dust and nuggets and received currency or specie in exchange.

A girl wearing levis and a red wool shirt was waiting for him in the doorway of the Exchange. Seeing her there, exactly as he had remembered her last, Jube Kern knew he had returned at last to the fountain-head of strength which had given him the will to pull through after medicos in San Francisco had pronounced his case hopeless.

"It's me, Vola," the marshal grinned, halting at the doorstep. "I've lost twenty-three pounds of tallow and I've got some gray hairs and a steady limp. But I'm back, like I promised you I'd be last Thanksgiving."

Tears flooded Vola Colton's amber eyes as their hands touched, and then she was in his arms, her cheek pressed against the cold metal of the law badge on his mackinaw.

"It's been unendurable, Jube!" she whispered as their lips parted a little later. "Not being able to get out of these terrible mountains all winter, not being able to send or receive a letter, yet knowing you needed me so and wondering if you were alive or dead."

He held her at arm's length, reveling in the beauty of her clustering chestnut hair, watching the haunted look fade from her eyes for the first time in five months.

NOT yet twenty, Gid Colton's daughter was a rarity in the Southern Mines, an unmarried girl in a land that was starved for feminine companionship, a girl who had pledged herself for eternity to a man the diggings said would never return.

"You shouldn't have done it, Jube," she said finally, when the first ecstasy of their reunion had spent itself.

Kern's brows arched quizzically.

"Done what—come back to the girl I aim to marry?" he chided, grinning down at her.

She blushed, taking a bandanna from her denim trousers and dabbing at her lashes.

"No—that coffin you shipped up here," she answered. "I didn't meet the stage because I couldn't have borne it if you hadn't been aboard, Jube. But when the driver unloaded that awful casket, and said you'd gone into Ristine's dive to get back your badge, I was cold with dread."

Gideon Colton interrupted them at the doorway then, a weather-beaten, erect man of forty, with a distinguished gray imperial. As they shook hands, Kern glanced past him and saw the black pine coffin he had purchased in San Francisco a week ago. It was now blocking the floor in front of the counter where Colton kept his gold scales.

"It goes without saying that I'm glad our prayers were answered and your

health has been restored, son," the banker said gruffly. "But I thought you were more level-headed than to make good that crazy promise of yours to come back with a coffin for Happyjack Ristine, Jube. It ain't like you to pull a story-book stunt like that. You're practically inviting Ristine's gunmen to bushwhack you one of these nights."

Kern grinned, unperturbed by the banker's protests.

"You can't buy a box or a crate in 'Frisco for love or money these days, Gid," he said. "Wait till you see what's in that coffin. It's the only kind of a receptacle I could get hold of."

Vola Colton and her father stared curiously as Kern went behind the Gold Exchange counter and found Colton's toolbox in its accustomed place. He returned with a short iron crowbar and proceeded to pry open the lid of the black coffin.

"Books!" exclaimed the girl, dropping on her knees beside the tightly-crammed casket. "No wonder it weighed like a ton of bricks."

III

KERN set the coffin lid to one side and watched Vola run her fingers along a set of calfhide encyclopedia, then tug out a massive morocco-bound volume of Shakespeare from the hundreds of books which the coffin contained.

"Books from around the Horn—and they sold for a song down on the *Embarcadero*, like so much ballast," Jube Kern explained jubilantly. "Enough to set up a library for those who know how to read in these diggings, Vola."

The girl ran her fingers almost lovingly over the backs of novels and other reading matter. These volumes would be worth far more than their weight in gold up here in this isolated backwash of the Argonaut country.

"I can't thank you enough, Jube," she whispered. "These are the first books beside Dad's Bible that I've seen since we left Missouri in Forty-eight."

Gideon Colton blew his nose loudly, busy riffling the pages of a law tome by Blackstone.

"We'll stow these books in the fruit closet out in the kitchen for the time being, honey," the banker said. "And then

I aim to chop this coffin into kindling wood and let the whole town know what I did with it. Five gets you ten son, that Happyjack Ristine and his Jackpot cutthroats are plotting right now to lay your carcass out in this box inside of twenty-four hours."

The grin faded from the marshal's lips, as reality crowded in about him once more.

"As chairman of the Law and Order Committee, Gid," Kern said, "I reckon you still give your backing to a no gun-toting law for Goldfork?"

Colton fingered his white tuft of chin whiskers.

"You're talking true, son. We weren't able to hire a marshal with courage enough to wear the star you pinned onto that wooden Injun at Ristine's saloon. And I haven't tallied up how many killings this camp has seen during the winter—most of them drunken brawls that would have wound up as harmless fist fights if the drunks hadn't been toting shooting irons when they came to town."

Jube Kern shifted the package of placards under his arm.

"Things will be different after sundown tonight," he promised gravely. "Which reminds me—I got a little job of bill posting to do around this camp, here and now."

Gideon Colton went to the window, laced his hands behind his back and stared off at the crowded main street.

"You couldn't have chosen a worse night in the year to inaugurate your gun-toting law, Jube," he commented. "Along with your stage, the first whisky this camp has seen in weeks arrived at the saloons. The gambling dens will play to sky-high stakes. The lid's off in Goldfork tonight. There'll be some new graves up the hillside tomorrow, I'm afraid."

Jube Kern paused with his hand on the door knob, reading the anguish in Vola Colton's eyes. Everything in the girl cried out to halt the marshal, yet both of them knew she would not speak the sentiments which were so close to her heart.

"I couldn't have chosen a better night, Gid," the marshal insisted. "The time to clamp down the lid is before it gets a chance to blow off. Tomorrow would be too late. . . ."

Tension mounted in gulch-rimmed Goldfork as the coppery globe of the sun westered closer to the pine-grown skyline

of the Sierra Nevadas, down-canyon below the camp.

There was whisky to be had in town tonight, ending a bar famine of over two months' duration. Whisky bred trouble, and trouble was a marshal's business. Goldfork had a marshal again. These two facts were carried by the grapevine to the uttermost cabin and mucker's tent on the up-creek placer claims.

Miners deserted their Long Toms and gold pans in the remote canyons for the first time in weeks and trooped to the gulch town to celebrate. On trees bordering every incoming trail to Goldfork the miners passed printed posters notifying them of Marshal Jube Kern's gun-toting law, once more in effect in Goldfork.

SOME innate sense of sportsmanship, engendered by a vague admiration for Kern's return to a camp where sure death would be at his elbow every hour around the clock, prompted the first moves of a goodly percentage of the incoming Argonauts. They dropped around by the jail on Nugget Street and surrendered what knives and firearms they happened to be toting.

"You ain't going to consider this here Allen's Pepperbox of mine a deadly weapon, are you, Marshal?" joshed Saleratus Burke the locksmith, turning in a six-barreled revolver. That weapon had enjoyed a plentiful sale to tenderfoots back East, heading for the gold fields of El Dorado.

Jube Kern scribbled off a receipt, tagged the Allen contraption and hung it on a wall nail.

"There's a circuit judge down Mariposa way who turned a murder suspect loose because he said it was impossible to kill or injure anybody with one of these Pepperboxes," Kern admitted, handing Burke his numbered ticket. "But we'll overlook his ruling, Saleratus. After all, it's just three pounds of iron to pack around in your jeans."

By the time the sun touched the crowns of the sugar pines on the gulch rimrocks, Kern's office resembled an arsenal. Weapons ranging from Sharpes buffalo rifles to dull-edged Barlow knives were hanging on the wall above his desk.

With the coming of sunset and the deadline of Kern's ultimatum, the marshal took

care of the last-minute rush of business from the boasters and late arrivals who had decided not to defy the Committee's edict.

Dusk was running down the gulch when Jube Kern locked his jail office and headed for the Gold Exchange. He had accepted an invitation to have supper with Vola and her father.

The young lawman ran the gauntlet of good-natured jibes during his saunter down the main street, but he took the hoorawing in the same spirit it was given. What counted was that he failed to spot a single miner wearing a gunbelt or sheath knife in defiance of his posted order.

Sol Kreidler buttonholed Kern as he passed the Okay Mercantile Store.

"All this forty-rod likker coming to town will have the gutters flowing red with blood by midnight, Jube," Kreidler said pessimistically. "I sort of wish you'd held off one more day, for your own safety."

Kern grinned, but his voice held no mirth.

"Other camps from Mariposa to Grass Valley have gun-toting laws, and they enforce 'em, Sol. There's no reason why Goldfork can't do the same."

Ten minutes later, seated at table with Vola and old Gid, Kern heard the question he had been dreading.

"Have Ristine and Malone and his Jackpot crew turned in their artillery yet, son?"

Kern saw Vola's troubled eyes fixed on his face as he shook his head.

"Not yet. I'm hoping to find their hardware stacked on the jail steps after I finish supper, Gid."

"And if you don't?" Vola's voice held a harsh note of anxiety, the first hint of strain she had revealed all evening.

Jube Kern shrugged, pouring sorghum on one of Vola's fluffy soda biscuits.

"I reckon I know where Ristine can be found," he said. He turned to the Gold Exchange banker with a cheerful grin. "I see you've stacked those books in the fruit closet, Gid. I hope you won't make good on that josh about chopping my coffin into stovewood. It set me back two hundred bucks for that pine box, and I had to give up the silver handles that went with it."

Night had descended over Goldfork's

tarpaper-roofed shacks when Kern, walking with a barely perceptible limp, made his way down the muddy street between the unpainted false fronts.

THE makings of trouble were rife in Goldfork tonight. Besides the unprecedented influx of Yankee and Chinese miners, a contingent of Me-Yuk bucks and their squaws from a rancheree back in the hills had arrived, trying to swap furs for firewater.

Lights glowed from the windows in Goldfork's twenty-odd saloons and gambling halls. Every establishment was crowded with miners and buckskin-clad hunters eager to buck the tiger and get drunk.

Jangly music came from the Forty-Niner Dancehall. There, booted muckers were square-dancing with the painted jezebels who had arrived from Sonora and Jimtown that evening.

Arriving at the jail, Kern found a half-tipsy hostler from the Bigstrike Livery Barn waiting for him on the steps. He held out a rusty-bladed bowie knife.

"Aim to obey the law," hiccoughed the stable boy. "Mighty glad you pulled tthrough, Jube."

Kern grinned, noting that Ristine had not sent a swamper over from the Jackpot with his quota of firearms.

"Thanks, Jerry. It's mostly the out-of-town buckos I'm interested in dehorning. You can pick up this skinning knife in the morning, huh?"

The main stem was ominously deserted when Jube Kern arrived at the Jackpot Saloon and crossed the porch. He paused by the batwings to unbutton his wool mackinaw, then pushed inside.

A sudden hush congealed inside the barroom as the marshal stepped over beside the wooden figure of Helldorado Harry. He stood there surveying the crowded hall.

Zeno Malone, his albino hair and pink eyes accentuated by the snowy fabric of his bar apron, was busy setting up drinks. The rough-dressed customers lining the brass rail was all eager to get their share of whisky before the limited supply ran out. Another freight wagon might not get up from the valley for weeks.

Whale-oil lamps guttered from ceiling beams under the mezzanine gallery.

Sounds of revelry came from Ristine's private gaming rooms upstairs. The atmosphere was cloyed with tobacco smoke and the fumes of liquor and human sweat.

Then Kern spotted Happyjack Ristine.

The frock-coated gambler turned over his roulette wheel to a croupier. He came across the sawdust-sprinkled puncheon floor, his cheroot trailing a ribbon of blue smoke as he headed toward the marshal.

Lamplight refracted from a pair of pearl-handled Dragoon Colts, buckled ostentatiously on the outside of Ristine's fustian swallowtail coat.

"Howdy, Marshal." Ristine's purred greeting carried to the far ends of the barroom, arresting the attention of drinkers and card players alike. "Looking for somebody in particular?"

Kern balanced on the toes of his boots, favoring his aching leg. He swung his mackinaw tails back to reveal his own thonged-down gun, his palms planted akimbo on his hips.

"Since when," he asked casually, "did you go in for packing guns in plain sight, Happyjack? I thought sleeve derringers were more your style."

Ristine shrugged, dragging a ruby finger down his coal-black side whiskers. Through the tail of his eye, Jube Kern saw two of the Jackpot's Mexican bouncers edging off to one side, ready to catch the lawman in a cross-fire if trouble developed.

"A gentleman can change his mind," Ristine grunted, savoring the tension of the moment. "Like I told you, a man carries his law on his hip here in Goldfork."

Kern shook his head. His sideward stare halted the Mexicans in their sidling progress toward the left end of the bar counter.

"Uh-uh, Happyjack. That was when this camp didn't have a duly appointed marshal to keep the peace."

RISTINE paused in front of the lawman, the ruby coal on the tip end of his cheroot ebbing and glowing as he sucked the weed. Kern had not budged from the steps, his back to Helldorado Harry, his eyes commanding every angle of the barroom.

"Is that what you come into my place to tell me, Marshal?" goaded the gambler, his voice raspy with veiled menace. "Isn't

my house keeping itself under control enough to suit you?"

Kern fanned a burst of cheroot smoke away from his eyes with his left hand.

"There's no gun-toting in town after sundown tonight," he reminded Ristine calmly. "Or had you forgotten?"

Few in the barroom saw what happened next.

One instant, Jube Kern's right hand was at ease on his hip, splayed fingers holding back the heavy folds of his mackinaw. The next, his cedar-stocked Dragon was in his fist, thumb earing the knurled hammer back at full cock, the muzzle end reamed sight-deep into Ristine's fancy vest where a gold-nugget watch chain hung in bright nodes between his pockets.

"You're under arrest for illegal possession of firearms, Ristine!" Kern's voice was pitched low, but it carried the impact of a thunderclap. "I'm jailing you for the night. The Miners' Law and Order Committee will hear your case in open trial first thing in the morning."

Ristine did not change expression by so much as a flutter of an eyelid. He shrugged, lifting both hands to the level of his head.

"I'm your prisoner, Marshal," he said mockingly. "Lead the way. I don't argue with a gun prodding my middle button."

Kern's eyes darted over the barroom crowd, jelled in a stunned tableau behind the gambler. He reached out with his free hand and took over Ristine's brace of .45s, slipping them into the roomy pocket of his mackinaw.

Then he backed out through the slatted batwings into the night, Ristine following with arms raised.

No words passed between the men as Ristine set off in the direction of Nugget Street. Kern kept to the middle of the street, away from the lamplighted gutters, crowing his prisoner close to block any attempt of a drygulcher opening fire from the black alleys flanking the street.

Two minutes later the marshal was checking the lock of a jail cell, after frisking the gambler and producing a .41 hide-out derringer in a spring-clip holster under Ristine's left cuff.

"You'll find blankets and a pitcher of water there," Kern said brusquely. "You honed to make a test case out of this?

It's lucky your barroom gunhawks didn't grab for leather."

Ristine's lips held a mocking grin in the glare of the jail lantern, the lattice-work bars falling in a check pattern across the narrow planes of his face.

"My men wouldn't think of defying the law, Kern," Ristine said with oily sarcasm. "Especially as long as I was in the line of fire."

IV

GRIMLY Kern locked the cell-block door and blew out his office lamp. His face held worried lines as he stepped out of the jail building, putting the wall to his back while he probed the shadows around him.

Things had gone too easy. It was as if Ristine had anticipated his arrest, had baited Kern into carrying through his bluff. There was hidden menace in the casual acceptance with which Ristine had responded to his arrest over in the Jackpot.

Reaching the plank boardwalk on the main street, Kern paused indecisively.

Other men in the Jackpot Saloon, including the albino, Malone, and Ristine's Mexican bouncers, were packing guns in plain sight. But Jube Kern was a patient and careful man. Cleaning out a nest of law-breakers in a hostile saloon would be suicidal for one man, and Kern had no intention of enlisting the members of Gideon Colton's Committee to back his play tonight. He would tame the camp on a lone-wolf basis or not at all.

Tomorrow, a miners' jury would condemn Ristine to banishment from Goldfork. They would give him twenty-four hours to wind up his business affairs and leave the diggings, as an accessory to most of the crimes committed in the camp to date.

Once they were without a leader, Zeno Malone and the other hoodlums would fall into line.

Having made his decision, Jube Kern headed for the Gold Exchange. And he knew that Volá Colton had seen her man leave this night with little hope of his return, and also realized that there was plenty of time between now and midnight to make his routine rounds of the other saloons in town and to check up on the

Me-Yuks camped down by the creek. He would see Vola now for a few minutes. . . .

Bartender Zeno Malone had taken advantage of the excitement which seized the Jackpot barroom following Ristine's arrest, to slip into the storeroom behind the bar where he kept his barreled liquor. Shedding his bar apron, the albino donned a flat-crowned hat and stepped out into the night through a back door.

He crossed a vacant lot behind Sol Kreidler's Mercantile Store and followed an alley to Bonanza Street. Waiting for him there was the buffalo-coated figure of Saleratus Burke, a grizzled Irishman who had found placer mining too tough for a man of his eighty-odd years, which was why he had opened a locksmith and tinware shop on the side street.

Without speaking, the two moved by prearranged plan to Burke's sod-roofed clapboard shanty at the intersection of the main street. The old locksmith made sure his window blinds were drawn before lighting the wick of his whale-oil lamp.

"Seems Kern took the only jail keys with him when he went below last fall." The old Irishman chuckled as he moved over to his workbench and hauled open a drawer. "When Gid Colton got me to fit new keys to the calaboose last Christmas, I figured a duplicate set might come in handy some time."

The bartender's albino-pink eyes flashed with suppressed excitement as he watched the old artisan fish in his junk drawer. Burke exhumed a ring of shiny new keys from their hiding place.

"Happyjack will pay you off with a poke of dust big enough to choke a jenny ass, Saleratus," the bartender grunted, thrusting the keys in a pocket of his linsey-woolsey shirt. "You better head back to the Jackpot and act like nothing happened. After the smoke settles tonight somebody on the Committee might put two and two together and start asking questions about the way Ristine broke jail so easy."

Saleratus spat a gobbet of tobacco juice at the wick of the whale-oil lamp and extinguished it. He followed the barkeep outdoors.

"Reckon you'll need any help?" he asked hopefully. "Just for the looks of it, I checked my old Allen's Pepperbox with the marshal this evening. But I still got my cap-and-ball pistol."

Burke shook his head.

"Ristine and me can punch Kern's ticket without extry help, thanks."

LEAVING Burke's shanty, Malone cut wide up the logged-off slope which had provided the whipsaw lumber for Goldfork's housing needs. He skirted the new stampmill which the quartz mining syndicate was building and dropped down the mountainside toward the jail in Nugget Street.

He paused in the shadow of an ailanthus thicket near the jail yard, checking the loads in his own guns and scouting the lay of the land before emerging into the open. The marshal's office and lean-to living quarters were dark. A light burned in the cell block where Ristine was incarcerated.

Malone made an exploratory circuit of the jail building before presenting himself at the marshal's office door. His cautious knock brought no response. Kern was out.

Selecting a key from the set which Saleratus Burke had fabricated for the Committee last winter, Malone unlocked the door and stepped into Kern's office. Guided to the cell block door by the shaft of light at the threshold, Zeno Malone squinted through the big keyhole to make sure Ristine was the only prisoner inside the jail at the moment, then unlocked the inner door.

Happyjack Ristine got up from his cell cot but showed no other reaction to his employe's arrival. The snow-haired bartender tested keys in the cell lock until he found the proper one. A moment later Ristine was walking into Kern's office.

"Keep the key ring," Ristine whispered. Fumbling among the guns hanging from wall pegs he discovered his own pair of pearl-handled Dragons. "No use implicating old Saleratus. We can toss 'em in the creek later."

Holstering his guns, Ristine led the way out into the night. They paused in the clotted shadow by the brick wall, listening to the tinpanny dance music from the Forty-Niner wafting across the spring night.

"Kern may be making his rounds," Malone suggested. "Shall we wait here?"

A scowl was forming between Ristine's brows as he stared off through the night in the direction of the Gold Exchange.

"I saw him head direct for Colton's," he grunted. "That's as good a place as any for a showdown with that son."

Malone started to say something, then thought better of it. Of all the men who had attempted to court Vola Colton, Happyjack Ristine had been most sensitive to the girl's rebuffs. It was another score Ristine had to settle with the young marshal of Goldfork before this night was much older. A score that came close to being the motive for Ristine's deep-rooted hatred for Jubal Kern.

They crossed the main street and approached the Gold Exchange through a corner lot that was overgrown with a jungle of wild raspberry bushes. From the concealment of the dense brambles they saw that the front office of the Exchange was dark, shutters drawn behind its formidable iron-barred windows.

Old Gideon and his daughter had lived in the back rooms of the Gold Exchange ever since Mrs. Colton had died in the smallpox epidemic which had swept the Southern Mines in Eighteen-Fifty. Skirting the side wall, the two conspirators saw lamplight glowing through pinholes in the green window shades of the Colton kitchen.

Muted conversation reached their ears as Ristine and Malone left the shelter of the raspberry thicket and stalked to the kitchen wall. Through the clapboards they heard Vola Colton's melodious laugh, a sound which brought hot blood rushing to Ristine's cheeks. Vola had never laughed like that when he was paying court to her.

"I figure the days of placer mining are about done for around this gulch, Gid." That was Jube Kern's voice. "The big combines will take over the quartz mines, and your business will die along with the jackleg muckers on their two-bit claims. Have you decided to stay in California or—"

THE voices faded as Ristine and the albino bartender made their way around the rear corner of the building. A streak of light from a Chinese joss house across the alley guided them to the kitchen door.

Ristine muttered an impatient oath as he tested the latch and found the door fastened on the inside.

"You drop back and cover the kitchen

window in case the marshal tries to make a break, Zeno," whispered the saloonman. "He can't get out through the front office. Colton keeps the Exchange locked up nights like a bank."

Malone slipped around the corner of the building to carry out his chief's order. Ristine waited for two minutes, drawing in a deep breath and holding it to steady the tom-tomming pulse which pounded in his eardrums.

His right hand was useless, a fact to which Ristine had difficulty in adjusting himself. He transferred a gun to his left hand and drew back, lunging against the flimsy door with his shoulder. The pot-metal latch shattered and Ristine smashed his way onto the back porch.

Inside the kitchen he heard a sudden startled hush, followed by a scuffle of boots and excited whisperings.

A quick leap carried Ristine to the kitchen door opening off the porch. He fumbled at the knob with his numb right hand, felt the door butt solidly against a bar on the inside.

"What is it?" came Gideon Colton's below. "Who's there?"

Ristine stepped back, gun leveled.

"Tell that marshal to come out with his hands raised, Gid!" the gambler rasped out. "The place is surrounded."

There was a moment of tense whispering inside the kitchen. Then Vola Colton spoke up timorously:

"Jube Kern—isn't here!"

With a cold laugh, the saloonman squeezed trigger to send a .45 slug hammering into the door lock. It shattered, but the inner bar held.

There was a jangle of glass inside the kitchen, proof that Zeno Malone had knocked out the pane with his gun barrel.

With savage impatience, Happyjack Ristine hurled himself at the kitchen door, felt the hickory bar rip out of its socket. He recovered his balance and the door slammed open, revealing Gideon Colton and his daughter standing side by side by the kitchen stove.

Ristine saw no trace of the marshal inside the kitchen. That could mean but one thing. Jube Kern must be waiting against the back wall, out of range of his vision. Or perhaps he had leaped into the adjoining parlor?

"Walk on in, Boss!" came Malone's tri-

umphant yell from behind the smashed-out window. "The marshal ducked into that closet behind the stove yonder! He's a dead pigeon!"

Vola gave a low cry of horror as Ristine, crouched low, slipped through the door. He moved quickly to one side in case the hidden lawman attempted a blind shot through the door of the fruit closet.

The saloonman's gun covered Colton and his daughter, the muzzle weaving from target to target like a snake's head. Both of the Coltons had gone bone-white, their eyes straying automatically to the flimsy wallpaper-covered door masking the entrance to a storage closet beside the stove.

"Come on in, Zeno!" Ristine called to his accomplice outside the window. Moving along, he put the Coltons between himself and the closet door where Jube Kern crouched in hiding. "Don't budge an inch, you two!"

Gideon Colton's craggy face was mottled with anger as he stared at the weaving bore of Ristine's pistol. Vole recoiled involuntarily as Zeno Malone stalked in through the back door, twin sixguns jutting from waist level. The albino's rabbit eyes glowed in the lampshine.

"Take Vola and the old man into the sitting room, Zeno," Ristine ordered, his voice a harsh whisper. "I don't want anybody in the way when I settle Kern's account!"

V

AT GUN'S point, the Gold Exchange banker and the girl stumbled through an adjoining doorway into the parlor, Zeno Malone stalking behind them.

"All right," Ristine panted, swinging his eyes to the closet door. "Come out of that closet, Marshal! Backwards. Stay put and I'll smoke you out!"

Jube Kern's muffled voice sounded from the cramped confines of the fruit closet:

"Go to hell, Ristine! I'm not ready to commit suicide yet awhile."

A lethal grin relaxed Ristine's mouth. This would be rare sport. Judging from the size of the closet door, Jube Kern's bulky frame must be cramped double in the tiny cubicle behind the paper-covered boards, without so much as a crack through which to sight his own guns. It

was a death-trap made to order.

"It's your hide, Kern!"

From the living room, Vola Colton gave a sharp cry as she saw Ristine level his sixgun at the closet door. The gun spat flame and bucked in Ristine's grasp, the slug punching a slot through the dead center of the square door.

As if seized with a nameless insanity Ristine tripped his gunhammer five times as rapidly as he could ear back the prong, shooting a loose pattern of bullet-holes through the flimsy pine boards. Then, pouching the empty Dragoon, he reached across to his second Colt and emptied it. Spacing the slugs evenly over the four quarters of the door, he riddled the thin boards high and low and in the center.

A sagging weight caused the door to bulge against its latch. Through bouncing layers of milky gunsmoke, Ristine stared across the kitchen, eyes drawn in fatal fascination to a rivulet of crimson fluid which leaked under the door and spread in an ever-widening pool across the floor boards.

The frenzied laughter of a madman burst from Happyjack Ristine's lips. Reloading his Dragoon with powder and shot and percussion he fired another dozen slugs into the perforated panels of the closet where Jube Kern had been crazy enough to take concealment.

The bright red puddle spread its tell-tale mirror under the door as Ristine emptied his last gun chamber and thrust hot-bored Colts into leather. Then he crossed the smoky kitchen in three strides and jerked the door knob of the closet. But Jube Kern had locked the cabinet from the inside.

"Fetch Gid and the girl back in here, Zeno!" the gambler called out, his voice shaky from the reaction of his throbbing nerves. "I want 'em to see the carcass I've got for that coffin Jube Kern shipped up here this morning!"

Vola Colton appeared in the living room doorway, her eyes swinging toward the bullet-riddled closet. She clutched her father's arm for support as Zeno Malone ushered them to the far corner of the room, opposite the closet.

Then she sighted the red puddle seeping under the door, and sagged fainting on Gideon's supporting arm.

"I didn't have anything ag'in you, Gid-

eon," Ristine panted, mopping his sweat-rinsed face with a fustian sleeve. "Not even when you organized your Committee with the idea of locking up my saloon and running me out of Goldfork. But you've seen too much tonight for me to risk letting you live."

Colton carried the inert body of his daughter to a chair by the kitchen table. Zeno Malone circled to keep them under the menace of his guns.

"Don't get tender-hearted notions about sparing the filly, Boss!" the albino spoke up warningly. "She seen and heard as much as the old man. She'll hate your hide worse than ever for cashing in Kern's chips. I'll fix her if you've lost your nerve."

RISTINE stalked over to the table, his eyes riveted on Vola Colton's marble-white face, her body held in Gideon's sheltering embrace.

"And to think I loved that girl—would have offered her diamonds and fine feathers and travel and everything a woman's heart could desire!"

Colton's oath interrupted Ristine's half-whispered reverie.

"Go ahead!" panted the banker frantically. "Shoot and be damned to you, Ristine! You'll be strung to the highest cottonwood limb in the gulch when Goldfork finds out you've murdered a woman in cold blood."

Ristine's fingers coiled about his gun stocks, half lifted the fancy Dragoons from leather. Then he turned to Zeno Malone, his face drawn into a malevolent mask.

"My Irons are empty," he said huskily, extending his hand. "Give me one of yours."

Malone's bloodless lips peeled back from his teeth as he passed one of his Colts butt-first to Ristine. The saloonkeeper cocked the weapon, hitching his shoulders as if bracing himself for the nasty chore that faced him.

"Hold it or I'll riddle you, Ristine!"

The voice came from the opposite corner of the room. Like puppets jerked by a common wire, Zeno Malone and Happyjack Ristine whirled. They stared at the apparition which was emerging from behind the opening door of the closet beyond the stove.

Marshal Jube Kern, crouched low to avoid an overhead shelf laden with jars of

canned fruit, was emerging from the storage closet, a cocked gun in either fist, the lamplight gleaming from the law badge on his mackinaw.

Kern stepped over a barricade of stacked-up, bullet-riddled books inside the closet door and drew up to his full height facing the bayed pair.

With a hoarse bawl of superstitious terror, Zeno Malone snapped the grip of the trance which froze his muscles. He dropped his gun to the floor, babbling incoherently as he raised his arms before the marshal's drop.

Staring through the gunsmoke at the reincarnation of the foe he had blasted into eternity a moment before, Happyjack Ristine raised his gun and tripped the hammer.

The saloonman's bullet, aimed in panic, crashed into a stove-lid wide to the marshal's left. Before he could cut down for a second shot, Kern opened up with both Colts roaring in unison.

Ristine's frock-coated torso jolted under the impact of converging lead. But he clung to his nerve and even as he sagged to one knee, he lifted his gun once more.

With cold precision, firing alternately with left and right guns, the marshal of Goldfork drilled his point-blank hail of slugs into Ristine's toppling frame. The gambler's Colt exploded once, to drive a shot into the floor at his feet.

Then, with blood spurting through his dark Dundrearys and blemishing the front of his flowered waistcoat, the gun boss of Goldfork pitched face downward on the floor. He lay still under a swaying umbrella of gunpowder fumes.

Vola Colton opened her eyes in time to see her father emerging from the Gold Exchange office, where he had carried Happyjack Ristine's mortal remains to the black pine coffin Kern had brought from San Francisco.

Zeno Malone, handcuffed to a table leg across the room, watched the banker's return with dull despair glazing his rabbitlike orbs. Gideon Colton would be the presiding judge at the miners' court which would mete out justice to the albino on the morrow, and already the feel of hang-rope was a tangible thing on the bartender's ivory-skinned throat.

Then Vola Colton became aware that her head was cradled in Jube Kern's lap.

"Jube—how—how—"

Her eyes left his to stray to the pile of books stacked in jumbled disarray inside the open closet.

"Do you think I'd have ducked into that closet if I hadn't been sure it wasn't a death trap, Vola?" The marshal chuckled, smoothing a stray curl off her damp forehead. "I hunkered down behind that double row of books you stored there."

"But," protested the girl, "I don't understand."

"Even a buffalo gun can't shoot a slug through twenty-four inches of solid paper, Vola. Even a two-inch book will turn a forty-five slug, let alone a barricade two feet thick. It was like being behind a stone wall."

The girl struggled to her feet, staring at the blood-red puddle which had leaked out of the closet.

"But I saw blood."

It was Gideon Colton who supplied the answer to that one. Returning from his examination of the lead-punched pile of the encyclopedia which had shielded Jube Kern from Ristine's fusillade, the banker carried with him a smashed jar from the

upper shelf of the closet.

"A quart of that wild raspberry juice you canned last year, Vola," Colton chuckled. "Smashed to smithereens. And made a mess of that volume of Shakespeare you was so glad to get."

The banker set the shattered fragment of the raspberry jar on the kitchen stove, and wiped the red stains from his fingers. Then he turned to the cowering Zeno Malone.

"While I'm taking you over to the jailhouse, Zeno," he told the bartender, "you can tell me how you engineered that jailbreak for your boss. I got a hunch Saleratus Burke won't linger around these digging's much longer."

Unlocking the albino's wrist irons with Kern's key, Gideon Colton turned his gaze at the marshal and his daughter.

"You two got plenty to talk over without Malone and me eavesdropping," he said with a grin. "I reckon Goldfork will tame down considerable when I go over to the Jackpot and tell those Mexican swampers to call for their boss. It ain't every gun boss who gets planted in a two-hundred-dollar coffin, eh, Malone?"

OWLS ALONG THE OSAGE



HOOT owls were so numerous in the early days along Missouri's winding, twisting Osage River that pioneer folks living there had a hard time sleeping at night because of the hooting of the pesky birds. According to a contemporary account, every hollow tree for miles along that erratic stream was full of them, and their noise was one continuous din.

Therefore, when the first steamboat service up the Osage was inaugurated, folks were right worried. Not only would they be plagued by owls hooting incessantly by night, but steamboat whistles would din their weary ears by day.

Thus the first trip to be made by steamboat up the meandering river was an event. All along its route men, women and children lined the banks, watching and listening most apprehensively. And although the boat made a fine racket, they went away convinced it wasn't as bad as they had feared.

Yet they still had those owls.

But that night the owls were mysteriously silent. Why? Well, those folks lay awake till dawn wondering, too. The next day, however, the mystery was solved for them. At the foot of those hollow trees lay the bodies of literally thousands of owls—decapitated!

Well, there was only one ready explanation for that mass suicide. An owl, it seems, doesn't move his body at all when following a moving object with his eyes. He just turns his head. And so it was that when that steamboat went a-hooting up that twisting river, those not-so-wise owls followed its tortuous course with their amazed and curious eyes—and thus twisted their fool heads right off their bodies. Anyway, that's what the legend says!

—Sam Brant

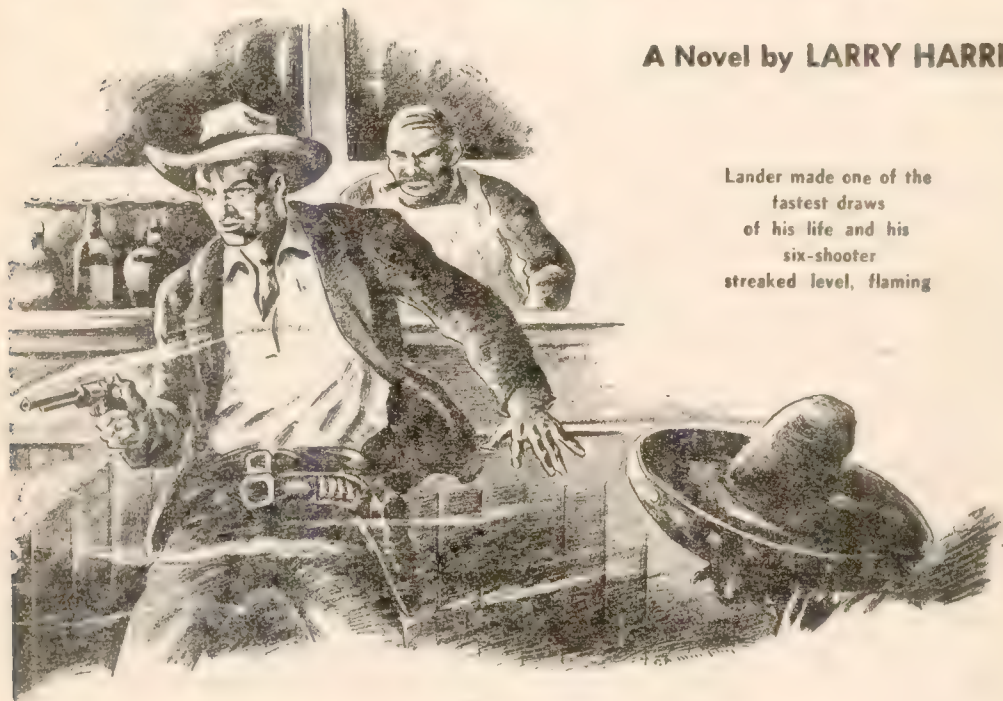
GLORY FOR



*The odds were against Jim Lander all the way
on this dangerous trail-herd drive, but he
made the gamble pay off in the end. . . .*

A DESERT FIGHTER

A Novel by LARRY HARRIS



Lander made one of the
fastest draws
of his life and his
six-shooter
streaked level, flaming

I

THE wintry sun went down and an icy blast of wind, hinting of snow, swept down from the high timbered ridges of the Guadalupes. Old Mount Baldy, already white-capped, lifted its head into the gathering storm clouds as if scornful of the desert below.

Hemmed in on all sides by the towering mountains, Tularosa Basin was a vast sea of mesquite-topped sand hills, barren of grass, without hope or promise. Spanish

dagger and yucca somehow found enough moisture in the shifting sand to survive.

There were some days, even in winter, when the brassy sun beat down with intolerable heat, while off in the foothills there was snow.

As evening shadows gloomed the basin, big Jim Lander walked to the trip-hammer of his crudely built well-digging rig. No one would ever know the dull ache of disappointment in his heart. His last

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length of four-inch pipe stood upright. The long pine pole boom was up, poised beneath the heavy tripod timbers.

The two men helping Jim Lander turned their eyes toward the suspended drive weight. When Lander pulled the trigger rope the massive weight fell with a crash, driving the pipe several feet deeper into the sand. When one of the men went to the hand crank to lift the weight for another drop, Jim Lander shook his head.

"That's the end, boys," he said quietly.

"I figured all along you was bucking long odds, Jim," one of the men replied. "You'll never hit water here. This is the desert, and nothing will ever change it. It ain't worth two cents an acre."

"Maybe I'll never live to hit water here," said Jim Lander, "but somebody will, some day. We've got to go deeper, and it'll take heavier equipment. There's water down below, enough to make this red sand grow anything. Some day this desert will be a garden spot."

The two men grinned behind Jim Lander's back. One of them spoke up.

"Going to take the trail boss job with your old man now?"

"Looks that way. Here's what money I owe you."

"Sure you don't need it worse'n us, Jim?"

"Nope. I want to start my job with a clean slate."

JIM LANDER paid the two men. It took every cent he had. As the men rode off through the gathering gloom, Lander went to his own horse and mounted. He looked a long time at the well-digging outfit. His gaze turned toward the endless expanse of sand hills and mesquite.

"Some day there'll be water here," he said aloud.

He turned and rode away, buttoning his ducking jacket against the frigid wind. A quarter of a mile back in the sand hills he came upon his ranch headquarters. The pole corral was only half finished. A clapboard shed still lacked a roof. Sand and tumbleweeds had drifted against the three-room 'dobe house.

Chico Morales, the wizened old Mexican hellion, met Lander at the front door. Out of blood-rimmed eyes he looked sadly at the tall cowboy, guessing the truth.

"No water?" he murmured.

"We'll have to dig deeper, Chico. Ready to go?"

"All ready, Jeem," said the Mexican.

Jim Lander didn't take time to eat the beef and frijole beans that Chico had prepared. Chico had their warbags packed. Each man tied his roll to the saddle-horn. Lander buckled an old black-butted six-shooter about his waist and handed another holstered pistol to the Mexican.

"Anything can happen on a trail drive, Chico," he said grimly. "But don't ever use it unless you're forced to."

A wintry darkness blanketed the desert as the two men rode away from the lonely little ranch. They wound around through the sand hills, the Arctic wind whipping at their hunched figures. Jim Lander rode in the lead, his hat pulled low. Behind him the Mexican rode in silence, his head bent with all the soul-weary servility of his race.

Near the foothills they came upon the rutted wagon road that led to La Luz. The trail mounted a saddle-back in the hills to the south where the scrub cedar and piñon bushes grew in jumbled profusion. From the higher slopes came the whine of the wind through the branches of the pine and balsam trees.

Once through the pass in the hills, Lander put his horse to a lope. Lights of La Luz glimmered on the flats below, beckoning of warmth and companionship—the conviviality of a wide-open cowtown. But Jim Lander thrilled to no anticipated joy. Deep inside him he was experiencing one of the bitterest moments of his life.

The main street opened before him, windswept and dusty. 'Dobe homes, bright with lamplight, stood one after the other. The tangy smell of burning pine logs and of cooking food filtered through the night air. From the center of town came the pound of hooves, the ebb and flow of man-made sounds from saloons and stores.

Lander wheeled up in front of one of the outlying homes. He told Chico Morales to go ahead, that he'd meet him later at the general store. And as the Mexican rode on, Lander slipped to the ground. He went up on the front porch and knocked. A girl in a neat calico dress met him at the door. In the shaft of lamp-

light her eyes were bright with eagerness.

"Jim!" she cried anxiously. "Tell me—"

He said, "No luck, Marta. There's water there. I'll just have to go deeper. But that will take money."

He went inside and she closed the door behind them. It was a warm room, the horse-hair furniture and pictures on the wall showing a woman's neat taste. He stood with his hat in one hand, a wide-shouldered man, well over six feet. He was only twenty-six, but he looked older. His hands were big, callused. His worn boots, faded jeans and jacket all told of poverty.

"You—you're not going to give up, are you, Jim?" the girl asked quickly.

He forced a grin. "I'm too stubborn for that, Marta."

"Please keep trying, Jim."

"I aim to—later on."

MARTA NOLAN, the sheriff's motherless daughter, stood close to him, smiling, even while tears brimmed her eyes. She was a lovely, slim-waisted girl in her early twenties, range-bred and tempered to the hardships of this wild, tumbled land. With blue eyes, and hair the color of honey, she had beauty, but greater still was her loyalty and devotion, all of which she gave to this tall, quiet man she loved.

"Jim," she whispered, "don't ever give up! That desert homestead is part of you—and me! You'll get water there some day. Every plan we've made will come true. Don't pay any attention to what others say."

Jim Lander laughed a little, the tension going out of his body. Then he told her he was flat broke, that the well-digging project would have to wait. He tried to mask his own bitterness, the hurt inside him.

"Right now there's only one thing to do, Marta. That's to take the Pool herd through for Dad and the other ranchers. I'll save all I can. But it may be years—"

"Out with it, Jim."

He looked away. But all the worry and torment of the last few months showed in his eyes for her to see. "We'll leave with the herd at dawn, Marta. I may be gone for several days. When I get back I see no hope for us to get married. I can't drag you down with my own failure

any longer. What I'm trying to say is that I don't want to hold you to your promise, Marta."

"Jim, look at me!"

He turned, seeing not the hurt he had expected. She was smiling, fairly breathing of strength. She gripped his arms, her lips trembling.

"You love me, Jim?"

"More than anything else in the world, Marta."

"That goes for both of us, Jim! I've waited this long for you, and I'm not quitting now. Your greatest fault is in having too much pride, cowboy. I'd have married you the first day you homesteaded that desert land if you had asked me. Since you didn't, I've stuck it out with you. We'll hit water. Keep fighting, Jim, and remember I've got my fingers crossed, and I'm praying."

II

NEW hope surged through Jim Lander, blinding him to all else save the courage and loveliness of this strong-willed girl. After he had taken her in his arms in an eager embrace, and had pressed her lips to his, he released her, and told her he'd have to go.

"Brock isn't going on the drive, is he, Jim?" she asked anxiously.

"No, Marta. He can't leave the store."

"Don't have any trouble with him, Jim. And please be careful."

He brushed away her fears, changing the subject. Then he kissed her good-by, telling her he'd have to hurry.

He was back out at his horse, ready to mount, when he espied Sheriff Jeff Nolan hurrying along the dark walk toward him. Jeff Nolan, squat and level-eyed, believed in every letter of the law, and was tough enough to uphold it.

He fairly idolized his daughter, and everyone knew he thought a lot of Jim Lander.

He was bundled in a sheepskin coat. His big hat was pulled low.

"I just left the store, Jim," he said gravely. "Brock is belling like a bull because you ain't showed up yet. The supply wagon is loaded, ready to go. Better hurry on down, son."

"Is Dad there?"

"Old Barney is out at the ranch, Jim."

Doc Beeson went out this afternoon to try to keep him in bed. Doc says he's on the verge of pneumonia. I'll keep an eye on things while you're gone. Let me warn you again—you're going to have to fight blizzards and drifts between here and Tascosa. It's going to be tough, with no more help than you've got. Keep an eye cocked for Grif Daggett's bunch. He and his cutthroats are still raiding the trail, plundering, and killing. And the army boys at Fort Stanton can't lay a finger on him. You're takin' a long gamble this time, son."

Lander grinned. "Long shots seem to be my favorite, Jeff."

"Good luck, Jim."

Their hands met in a strong clasp of understanding. Then Lander mounted and rode toward the center of town. Through the dust-filled darkness he spotted the high-wheeled, canvas-topped supply wagon in front of one of the stores. Men with lanterns were milling around it, their loud talk muffled by the wind. As Jim Lander wheeled up several of the bundled men spoke to him.

Chico Morales was in the wagon seat with the Broken B cook, who was scowling. Other men were inside the store. Over the front door the huge red-lettered sign creaked as it swayed in the wind. Lander glanced up at it as he mounted the steps. It said:

BROCK LANDER
GENERAL MERCHANDISE

A cow-bell clattered as Lander stepped through the door. Several loafers around a pot-bellied stove turned, their conversation freezing. Busy behind a counter, a tall man looked up, eyes flashing, face flushed with anger.

In a voice, gritty with rising rage, he said, "You're the kind that would make us wait, Jim. Now don't tell me you're going to turn the old man down."

Swift anger shot through Jim Lander like a flame. But he held it in check, struggling against the violent dislike he held for this foster brother of his.

Brock Lander was as tall as Jim, but dissipation had thickened his waistline. Handsome in a hard sort of way, this black-haired, black-eyed man had been sent to an Eastern university by old Bar-

ney Lander, Jim's father. Brock had spent two years in Mexico as a mining engineer. Four years ago he'd returned to La Luz, bought the largest store in town and had made money hand over fist. He sold supplies on credit, boasted a lot, swaggered when he walked, and it was common knowledge he had made a bid for Marta Nolan's attention.

BUT with all his faults he had cleverly wormed his way into the good graces of the folks in La Luz.

"I'm not turning anybody down, Brock," Jim said levelly. "What did you want to see me about?"

Brock strode out from behind the counter, snapping an order to a Mexican clerk to finish the job he'd begun. He made an impressive figure in his immaculate dark suit and highly polished black boots. His eyes played over Jim's faded, patched range garb, his run-over boots.

His smile was an insult, his words a whiplash.

"I want to warn you, Jim—and for once in your stubborn life try to see the light—you're the only man around here that can get Dad's Pool herd through safely. He and the other men are counting on you. If they lose those cattle they're ruined, wiped out! Forget your crazy well-digging ideas and that desert homestead of yours. Like I told Dad, this is your big opportunity to—"

"Come to the point, Brock!" Jim snapped.

"—to make good! Prove to us that you're all man. Guard those cattle with your life. Grif Daggett's bunch is on the rampage. If you meet up with him"—Brock Lander sneered—"don't join him, fight him! I've furnished the supplies for this trip. I've even hired the four men to go with you. They're tough, but honest. I'm paying for their services out of my own pocket. Now take the wagon and head for the ranch. Dad's out there sick, waiting for you."

Jim Lander turned to the door, throttling the fires of his rage. He'd only taken a couple of steps, however, when Brock's voice, an ugly taunt, stung his ears.

"And forget Marta while you're gone. I'll take care of her."

Jim turned. The loafers near the store were grinning. Brock's smile was cold.

In the depths of his black eyes were pinpoints of hatred.

"Marta can take care of herself, Brock," Jim said softly.

"Don't take her too seriously, Jim," said Brock. "She's like everybody else—she pities you. Don't take that for love. She and everybody else knows you hit the outlaw trail with Daggett's bunch one time. That's what I meant when I said this is your one big chance to pick the name of Lander up out of the muck."

Jim said softly, "Brock, you've been nothing but a liar and a trouble-maker all your life."

He took two steps forward. Brock cursed and swung first, his blow glancing off Jim's shoulder. Then, eyes burning in his gaunt face, Jim let drive a terrific right. It caught Brock on the point of the chin, crashing with all the sudden force of a mustang's kick. The man reeled back, eyes rolling with pained surprise. He struck the counter, spilling a stack of groceries.

Then, face livid with hate, Brock came out swinging, feinting, dodging, driving Jim back on his heels with vicious, cutting blows that drew blood. Brock was grinning crookedly, confidently. In college he had learned to box. He'd learned all the unfair tricks the ring had to offer. And once an opponent went down he was just the kind who would kick a man's ribs in.

"I've been waiting a long time to do this, Jim!" he snarled.

Bleeding and half-dazed, Jim stumbled back under the terrific onslaught. His own blows went wild. A vicious right caught him low. Sick, afire with pain, he went down to one knee, sobbing for breath.

Through a swirling blur he saw Brock lunge forward for the knockout. He staggered to his feet, meeting that drive head-on, both rock-hard fists working like pistons.

Fierce exultation roared through him as he felt his fists connect with flesh and bone. His puffy, bleeding lips were pulled back across his teeth in a faint grin. He sank one fist into the store-owner's thick middle.

GAGGING and sick, Brock stumbled back across the counter again, out on

his feet, cursing thickly.

Then the clatter of a cow-bell beat into Jim's consciousness. He turned, stared at the two men in the doorway. Old Barney Lander stood there, eyes glowing with rage. He shook like a mighty oak in a storm, a great, thick-chested giant whose brawn and courage had carved an outfit out of the wilderness.

He stood reeling, patently sick, and afire with fever. At his side stood Doctor Beeson, cursing the big rancher beneath his breath. But if Barney Lander heard he gave no sign. His scathing ire was for Jim alone.

For years he had been touchy and bitter toward Jim, and strangely doting toward Brock, his adopted son. Gossip had it that he had always been disappointed in Jim.

"I was afraid of something like this, Jim!" he bellowed hoarsely. "What's the matter? You trying to kill Brock because he made eyes at Marta Nolan? Why the hell I ever had to have a son like you is beyond me! Head for the ranch. We'll talk later."

Every fiber of Jim Lander's being shook with rebellion. He started to tell his father where to head in, and a lot of other things, but he didn't. He bit his lips, throttling his passions.

He merely snapped to Beeson, "Take Dad on back out to the ranch, Doc. Put him to bed and keep him there. I'll fetch the wagon out."

III

OUTSIDE in the street the men had finished loading the hooligan wagon. Chico Morales and the old Broken B cook had joined them in peering through the front window when the fight started. They'd heard everything that had been said.

Chico and the cook got back on the wagon seat as Jim Lander strode out. They had their horses tied to the end-gate. Lander swung astride his own horse, conscious of the onlookers watching him. He rode ahead, motioning for Chico to follow with the wagon.

Chico's whip cracked. Trace chains rattled as the mule team started off with the heavy wagon. As they rumbled past one of the saloons two men came to the door—

way. One of the men lifted his hand and shouted:

"Good luck, Jim!"

They were at the edge of town, heading up the grade, when Doc Beeson's buckboard passed them. In the seat with the old medico was Barney Lander, bundled in a sheepskin coat, a bearskin robe over his lap. Doc Beeson shouted to Jim Lander that they'd meet him at the ranch.

The biting night wind chilled Lander to the bone, but the darkness was balm to the torture inside him. He glanced back, saw Chico's hunched figure on the swaying wagon seat. Since coming to Tularosa Basin, a lot of people had called Chico a back-stabbing little Mexican, but with complete indifference Chico had shrugged it off. His loyalty to Jim Lander bordered on worship. And Lander prized that man's companionship more than any-one would ever know.

Lander had never been one to make a lot of friends. The robust hilarity of cowtown pleasures had never appealed to him. When just a kid, Jim would leave the Broken B spread in the foothills and ride into the desert. He liked the loneliness, the strange desert sounds, the smell of the greasewood. That wasteland drew him. It fascinated him.

Even as a boy he had felt the challenge of the desert. He had become confident that, with water, the sandy red soil would grow anything. He had pictured feed lots, growing fields of alfalfa, and prime cattle.

When he'd told his father of his plans, old Barney's jaw had sagged. Tough-hided old Barney hadn't been able to *sabe* a kid with such crazy ideas. Never one to reason, he had stormed and cussed. He'd never understood Jim's quiet ways, and this galled him.

"Stay out of the desert down there, Jim!" he had ranted. "You're just like your ma used to be—dreaming dreams. Here in the foothills is the place to ranch. Pitch in and make me a hand. Some day, maybe we can own all this damned foothill land. We'll make a lot of money."

"I like the desert," Jim had replied quietly.

Barney Lander had given up with Jim after that. He had seemed to lose all hope of molding his son into his own likeness. He would go into town on three-day bends and return to the ranch more surly

than ever. Jim had turned to the friendly counsel of Doc Beeson—and found a friend. Doc Beeson had been younger then, and he had liked to listen to Jim.

There had been times when, unknown to old Barney, they would ride down into the desert together.

Doc Beeson had come to the Guadalupe country for his health. A pallid, thin little man, he had the dreamy eyes and long-fingered hands of an artist. He was a cracker-jack surgeon, despite the fact that he drank more than a man should. He liked to quote poetry and sing, but there were times when he could cuss like a mule-skinner. He was the only man in the country who could make Barney Lander listen to reason.

"Your pa is all right, Jim," Doc Beeson would say. "Beneath that tough hide of his he's got a heart of gold. He believes his way of ranching is the only way. Some day perhaps we can change him."

But Barney Lander did not change. He let the entire Guadalupe country know he was disappointed in Jim. One day, returning from a trip to Abilene, he had brought a homeless waif with him.

"This boy's name is Brock, Jim," he had announced. "From now on he's going to be your brother. I want you to treat him as such."

FROM the first the two boys had clashed. It rankled Jim to see how his father doted on the new boy. There had been times when Barney completely ignored his own blood son for the new boy. Jim had tried to hide the terrible hurt inside him. But when life on the ranch had become unbearable, Jim had run away.

He had been only a gangling, bitter-eyed kid at the time. In Texas he had found a job riding the rough string. As the years passed he had drifted into Mexico. He had tried to forget the past, but the haunting memories of his desert basin drew him like a magnet. The desert was in his blood.

When Jim Lander had at last turned north toward the Border, in a cantina brawl one night he had saved Chico Morales's life. And Chico, renegade Border-hopper, one-time revolutionist, had stayed with Lander ever since, wherever he went, loyal as a mongrel pup.

Returning to the Guadalupe, Lander had found the cowtown of La Luz unchanged. But the people he had known had grown older. Doc Beeson was thinner than ever, his cough more racking. Barney Lander, his hair gray and eyes more puckered, bristled like a huge mastiff. For years he had brooded, nursing all sorts of imaginary wrongs.

"I figured you'd come back with your tail drooping, Jim!" he had boomed. "Is

If Barney Lander had struck Jim across the face with a blacksnake whip it couldn't have hurt worse.

Jim had met Marta Nolan the same day. She had grown from a kid with pigtails into lovely womanhood. She smiled, her eyes filled with promise.

"I'm glad you're back, Jim," she'd said simply. "Let the gossips whisper all the ugly things they want to about you once being an outlaw. I don't believe it. Neither

THE GUN COLLECTION

CHURCH services were being held one Sunday morning in a hall in Paradise Valley, Nevada, in the days when men were swarming into Nevada searching for gold.

On the edge of the town of Paradise Valley was a camp of Paiute Indians. They were friendly to the white men but it hadn't been so long since the last uprising of the Indians in Nevada.

There were a few Indians in the congregation. As the minister preached, a young buck dozed off to sleep, and dropped his gun. It went off. With visions of the last Indian uprising fresh in their minds, every man in the congregation jumped to his feet, their guns drawn.

The minister's wife, who was sitting up in front of the hall, quickly rose to her feet. Holding her full skirt in front of her like a wide apron, she walked calmly down the aisle and demanded that every gun be dropped into her apron. She thus averted what might have been a bloody massacre.

—Edna Stewart



the law after you? Don't look surprised. Word got to us that you were riding the owlhoot with Grif Daggett's outlaw bunch below the Border."

"I never heard of Grif Daggett."

"Don't lie about it, Jim!" Barney stormed wrathfully. "As long as you're here try to do what's right, that's all. Who's that back-stabbing little Mex with you? Whoever he is, he ain't goin' to help your standin' around here!"

do a lot of other people. Stay here and prove to them your ideas about the desert."

Jim Lander had stayed, avoiding his foster-brother as much as possible. Brock, he'd soon learned, had been away to college. Then he had spent some time in Mexico. He had returned to La Luz with money and bought the general merchandise store. Since then he had lent money to the scattered foothills ranchers at a

high rate of interest.

Brock was ambitious. He made it a point to be good to crotchety old Barney Lander, catering to the oldster's every want. It made Jim a little sick to see Brock hypocritically playing into the hands of the ranchers. When Barney died the Broken B would go to Brock. Folks thought it fine that Brock Lander had become such a great success.

Jim knew that Brock whispered all sorts of rotten tales behind his back. He also knew that Brock was playing a snake's game, waiting, and that down the middle of Brock's back there was a yellow streak.

Because of Marta Nolan more than anybody else, Jim had stayed on. He homesteaded a section of the desert basin land, ignoring derisive remarks. For months he and Chico slaved from daylight till dark, building the house and shed. With what money he'd saved he tried to dig a well. When the foothill drought continued he knew his father and the other ranchers were suffering tremendous losses.

HE HADN'T realized how serious it was until a week ago, when Barney Lander had ridden up with three other hard-hit ranchers. Old Barney looked even older. His massive shoulders were bent with defeat. Patently he was sick of body as well as soul. He could hardly talk for coughing.

"I'm doing something I swore I'd never do, Jim," he said heavily. "That's come to you for help. But I've got my back to the wall. Me and Threadgill and Whitlock here have pooled what beef we've managed to pull through the drought. Getting them to the market in Tascosa is our only way of making ends meet. We've borrowed to the hilt from Brock. He ain't got any more to loan us."

Jim Lander stood for several minutes in silence, thinking this over.

"What do you want me to do, Dad?" he finally asked.

"Take the job as trail boss, Jim. You're the only one I know who can do it. Brock has hired four men to go with you. We've had to let all our old hands go. I need you, Jim. Let's forget the past. I'm asking you to lend me a hand. Overlook your troubles with Brock."

IV

BARNEY LANDER talked on, and Jim knew it was bitter as gall in the oldster's mouth, having to come to his son for help. Barney wouldn't have done it if he hadn't been desperate. Barney mentioned that Grif Daggett's renegades were raiding the trail now; that winter was on them; that the risks would be great.

"I'm hoping the ugly stories I've heard about you riding with Daggett one time ain't true, Jim. Will you take the job?"

Pity stabbed at Jim. It was stronger than his resentment. Here, he thought, was a chance to breach the chasm of misunderstanding he'd had with his father.

He'd said quietly, "Yes, Dad. I'll take the job."

That had been a week ago. Since then he'd tried desperately to finish his well—and had failed. Now he knew he'd made a terrible mistake in accepting the job. His father would never change. But he felt obligated to go ahead.

Poignant memories stirred in Jim Lander as he rode deeper into the foothills. The icy wind shrieked through the pine trees, hurtling out of the north. Snow had begun to fall when he came in sight of the Broken B buildings.

In a large clearing the sprawled log ranchhouse stood backed up to a cliff. Lamplight glimmered at the windows. Wood smoke cut through the cold air. Buckboards and saddle horses stood in the yard. Off to one side the bunkhouse and sheds were dark. From a nearby mountain meadow came the clack of horns, the bowl and rumble of hooves as cowboys sought to bed the cattle.

Through the trees Lander spotted the blinking eyes of a campfire. Nearby was the chuckwagon, and beyond it was a rope corral holding the remuda. As Chico drove the supply wagon up to where Lander sat his horse, the Broken B cook lifted his raucous voice above the storm.

"We're heading for the campfire, Jim! Tell Barney it'll be daylight before I can have my chuckwagon ready to roll. And then, by gravy, it'll keep me and this Mexican a-humping."

His words edged out in the roaring wind as the wagon rumbled off through the trees. Lander dismounted, untied his warbag and took out an old sheepskin

coat. He knew there would be no sleep that night. If his guess was right, the storm would be a raging blizzard by dawn.

The wind lashed at him as he hurried up on the porch of the big cabin. All the old bitterness stabbed at him as he stepped into the front room. It was the first time he'd been inside the place since he'd run away from home. Across the lamplighted room several ranchers stood near the fireplace. Doc Beeson came through an inner doorway, saw Jim Lander, and nodded.

"He's finally in bed, Jim, burning up with fever, but asleep. Rest is what he needs now."

"Pneumonia?" Lander asked.

"In both lungs. And his age, plus the altitude, is going to make it one of the toughest battles Barney ever fought."

The rage in Lander melted like snow on a hot stove. He stepped to the bedroom door, peered inside. A lamp was turned low. With closed eyes, old Barney lay in the bed like a dead man, except for his raspy breathing. Even in sleep the oldest's grizzled-whiskered face was lined, reminders of the harsh passions that ruled his waking moments.

The blood ties were stronger in Jim than he'd realized. With all his faults, Barney Lander was his father, sick now and fighting for his life. A knot swelled in Jim's throat. Mentally he cursed again the name of Brock who had so subtly widened the breach between father and son.

As Jim Lander went out and faced the men in that front room he sensed their doubts and suspicions, their fears and desperation. They were big men, their lives gloomed with impending tragedy. Failure of the drive meant ruin for each of them. They were Bowie Threadgill, Sam Whitlock and Webb McCann, honest foothill ranchers whom Jim Lander had known since childhood. Each of them, he also knew, had borrowed money from Brock, mortgaging their outfits. And not a man among them could stand the rigors of the drive.

TALL Bowie Threadgill said, not unkindly, "Doc will give your pa the best care a man could get, Jim. We want you to know we're mighty thankful for what you're doing."

Jim went over some of the details of the drive with those men. He told them his plan—to head over the mountains to Bosque Grande, up the Pecos to Fort Sumner, then across the Llano Estacado to Tascosa on the Canadian.

None of the men mentioned the name of Grif Daggett, or the possibility of raids by his cutthroats. But Lander knew they were thinking of him.

They spoke of the early winter that was on them, knowing they had waited too long to make the drive.

"There's three hundred and sixty branded stuff in the herd, Jim," Webb McCann said glumly. "It'll be a chore, with just you and the hired men to hold them. Charlie, the cook, will drive the wagon."

"There'll be Chico," Jim said.

The ranchers glanced at one another. It was plain that they didn't think much of Jim Lander's Mexican helper.

When Doc Beeson went back into Barney's bedroom, the Pool men rode with Jim out to the bedded herd. One of the hired trail hands, a thick-shouldered, beady-eyed man by the name of Blutcher, was guarding the herd. The other three men stood at the campfire, gulping coffee from tin cups.

The chill of the greetings, their grumblings, told plainly of their dislike for the chore ahead. Lander had seen all three of them in town at various times. Hard-faced, gun-hung, they loafed around the saloons. None of them was the rollicking, hard-riding cowboy type that Jim would have chosen.

Slim Durkin, patently the leader, was several inches over six feet. The bulge beneath his sheepskin told of a six-shooter at each hip. A scar ran from the corner of his mouth to his left temple. He stalked forward with the effortless glide of a mountain lion, laid a limp palm in Lander's hand. His eyes, dead and colorless pools, looked the trail boss over. His lips curled back over stained teeth in what was meant for a smile.

"Glad to know you, Lander," he said. "I've seen you around. When do you plan to pull out?"

The man's hand felt like a snake in Lander's palm, but Jim masked his feelings. "At dawn," he said quietly.

He took over then, assigning each man

to a chore. Chico and the cook opened supplies and loaded the chuckwagon. They decided on taking only one wagon, piling every available inch of it with food, blankets and gear. Chico was appointed as the horse-wrangler and cook's helper.

There were a hundred last-minute chores to be done. As the night wore on the snowfall thickened, blanketing the ground. Some time past midnight Lander and Chico took time to wolf some grub the old cook had prepared. Then, dead-tired and cold, they went with the other men to the house.

As the men spread their blankets on the front room floor, Jim tiptoed into his father's bedroom. Old Barney was still sleeping. Doc Beeson was in the room, taking his patient's pulse count. When the medico looked up the strain showed in his thin face.

"No change, Jim," he said softly. "A strong heart and the will to live is all we got to count on."

Jim went into the front room. He was unutterably tired, but he knew he could not sleep. The trail hands were on the floor, snoring. Old Bowie Threadgill caught Jim's eyes, motioned him outside. Worry lay deep inside the old rancher.

HE SAID, "We're heading for our homes now, Jim. You'd best try for some sleep. With what you got ahead of you, you'll need your strength. Don't worry about them men going with you. They're tough, I know. But you may need tough hands before you reach Tascosa. Brock knows each of them. He's vouched for their honesty. Good luck, Jim."

His hand clasp was strong.

After the ranchers departed, Jim Lander remained standing beneath the porch roof. The raging, snow-filled wind seemed to carry a warning. Storm-tossed currents of unrest beat at him. He didn't hear the door open at his back. When he turned Doc Beeson was standing there.

"Be careful, Jim," the old medico said queerly. "Just be careful."

V

SLEEP was not for Jim Lander that night. He sought his blanket, but he lay awake, listening to the raging storm outside in the night. An hour before dawn

he was up, rousing the men, gulping the steaming hot coffee prepared by the cook.

In a blinding snowstorm the grumbling men rigged their horses. The wind still came out of the north, cruel, heartless. The cook hitched and mounted the wagon, cursing the cold. The men, bundled in heavy coats, spurred their horses around the herd, shouting and swearing.

Lander put Slim Durkin and another tough hand at swing as the bawling cattle strung out. The other two men rode drag. Behind them the canvas-topped wagon rolled crunchingly through the snow. And Chico, yelling at the top of his lungs, herded the remuda.

At point, Lander headed for the old wagon road that led across the hills. There was a tight feeling in his throat as he glanced back. Dimly he made out the figure of Doc Beeson standing in front of the cabin. The old medico's hand was lifted in hail and farewell. Further down in the basin, behind them, Lander knew there would be no snow. Some day, he thought, other men will recognize the advantages of that desert.

The storm was a howling blizzard by dawn. Through the swirling white wall of snow, Lander spurred his horse up and down the line of straggling cattle. He shouted encouragement to the men, lending a hand wherever needed. Twice the heavy wagon stuck in drifts, and each time Lander and Chico were there, pulling the load free with ropes around their kak horns, while the other men went on with the herd.

In that screaming storm Jim followed the road by instinct more than anything else. They passed through a slot in the hills where drifts were piled high against the towering pines. Inside Lander was a voice, screaming at him to hurry. By nightfall, if their luck held, they would be out of the uplands. On the brushy flats farther to the east the snow would be less.

Noon came, but Lander did not call a halt to eat. He sent each man to the wagon for cold jerky. At times he fought against drowsiness. He ached with weariness, and the cold cut through his heavy coat. Stiff and half-frozen, he clung to the saddle-horn much of the time, peering through frosted lids as the roaring storm held.

Some time that afternoon they passed a

trapper's cabin alongside the trail. A bearded oldster in a coonskin cap and coat plodded through drifts to confront Lander. Slim Durkin and one of the flank men whirled up on jaded horses as the trapper lifted his voice above the storm.

"Who are you and where you headed, son?"

Lander tried to explain, his voice all but lost in the wind.

"You're crazy, son!" the trapper bawled. "The storm's worse on the flats below. And if you do make it to the Pecos you got Grif Daggett's hellions to buck. I was in at Bosque Grande for supplies two days ago. Word was that they'd just run off a Turkey Track herd."

Lander raged, "We've got to get through!"

He set the pattern, lashing the men on to greater effort, doing the chores of two men himself. Frost stabbed from the nostrils of the stumbling, bawling cattle as they fought the drifts. Pistol shots carried leadenly through the blizzard as riders hurried the drags. Three times the men changed horses, rigging and unrigging with cold-stiffened fingers. Chico, his face blue-black with cold, held to his chore without grumbling.

Once, riding behind the wagon, Lander came upon Slim Durkin and another tough hand drinking from a bottle. They glared at Lander out of red-rimmed eyes, openly antagonistic, knowing that the bottle was taboo on the trail.

"Well, what're you goin' to do about it?" Durkin snarled.

"Nothing!" Lander snapped. "Just keep the herd moving!"

HE RODE on to point, fighting the sleep that tugged at his eyes. Numbness crept over his tortured muscles, and he flapped his arms to keep up circulation. At times he sang to keep awake, his voice a croaking sound of drowsiness.

Back through the swirling snow and screaming wind he rode to lend a hand with the tiring herd. A few cattle stumbled and went down, but the long line kept moving. Anger lashed at Lander when he saw Slim Durkin and the other men shirking their duties, but he held his temper. A sense of loyalty to his father and the other hard-hit Pool men drove him on like a man obsessed.

Up and down the line he rode, shouting, "Keep 'em moving, boys! Don't let 'em stop, keep 'em moving!"

Then at point again he suddenly realized that they were out of the high timber. Darkness was falling, but through the white curtain of snow he discerned the sweep of brushy flats of the lowlands. The wind was lessening. Yonder on the flats the snow was but a thin blanket.

Lander's cheering shouts carried back down the line. As the trail made a sharp dip, he spurred his jaded horse to the rear. Half-tipsy and surly, Slim Durkin met him at drag.

"We're out of the mountains now, Lander!" he growled. "All of us boys is plumb tuckered. Let's call it a day."

Lander answered, "Keep going, Durkin. We're not safe yet."

He wheeled back to where Chico was hazing the remuda. The little Mexican's eyes were bloodshot. He was so numb and cold he could hardly talk, but he was grinning.

"I'm weeth you, Jeem," he managed to say.

Lander nodded, stirred by the knowledge that come what might, he could count on Chico siding him.

Down the trail they prodded the lagging, exhausted herd. They might have gone a mile or two miles. Lander had no way of knowing. Night was on them, black as the inside of a boot, when he finally called a halt in a protected canyon.

"Eat and sleep, boys," he said wearily. "I'll take the first guard."

He tried to eat with the other men as they thawed out around the campfire, but his stomach rebelled at the idea of food. Sick with fatigue and exposure, he rode to the bedded herd, began circling. The wind died down and the snow ceased falling, but the cold told of lowering temperatures.

It was long past midnight when Lander returned to the campfire. The men were rolled up in their blankets near the fire. Grumbling, Slim Durkin roused to take the next shift. Lander gave instructions for the next guard, then rolled up in his blankets beneath the wagon. Close by, the cook lay snoring. Next to him was Chico, his eyes wide open in the darkness.

"Something is going to happen, Jeem," he whispered.

Lander grinned tiredly. "Not now, Chico. We're safe now."

Sleep claimed him almost instantly, but it was a troubled sleep, freighted with nightmares. Stiff and sore, he was up at dawn, fired again by the urge to hurry. After a quick breakfast he again had the men in the saddle and the herd on the move.

By noon they were completely out of the snow country, heading across a barren wasteland. But the skies remained leaden and the temperature touched zero. Gaunt, hungry cattle broke the line to grab at patches of buffalo grass. The men, their tempers explosive, snarled at one another. They glared at Lander, avoiding him whenever possible.

That evening they reached the squalid, clapboard settlement of Bosque Grande and made camp on the outskirts. Relief poured through Lander, but he was in no mood to join the others in town, had he been asked. He and Chico were left alone with the herd. At dawn Slim Durkin, the cook, and the other three men rode up, roaring drunk.

"What do you say, Lander?" Durkin taunted. "Ready to go on? Or would you rather lay around for a week and visit the gals in town?"

LANDER stiffened, throttling his ire. "We'll go on, Drukin," he said softly.

He held a more leisurely pace that day, following the winding course of the Pecos. He wanted to save the cattle as much as possible. A dreary sun peeped through the clouds that afternoon, abating the frigid cold. But that night the wind came up again, heralding more snow.

Next day and the day after it was the same, cold and blowing, but the storm passed. Running guards at night. Grumbling and boorish mutterings of the men. Clacking horns and bawling cattle. And Lander, gaunt and hollow-eyed, passing along the word that they'd be in Fort Sumner on the morrow.

More than ever Lander became conscious of the tension among the men. For the most part they ate their meals in silence, but their furtive glances, their rebellious mutterings spoke eloquently of trouble brewing. Not one of Brock's hired men had openly challenged Lander's authority, yet with each passing hour

Lander felt the tension grow. A warning bell kept clanging in his brain.

The mannerisms of these men, their talk branded them as gunmen. Lander saw it, and wondered why Brock had ever hired them. In moments of bitter contemplation he wondered why he had ever assumed the responsibility of this drive. He could easily have refused his father and the other ranchers.

When they camped that night in a bosque near the river, Lander tried to pin down the sinister threat that sawed at his nerves. The men hunkered around the campfire, were strangely silent as they wolfed their food. From the stunted timber came the low moan of the bedded herd.

"This is where Grif Daggett's bunch has been raiding, boys," Lander said grimly. "Tonight we'll stand double guard. If trouble comes I'll expect each of you to fight. We've got to guard this herd with our lives."

Slim Durkin got to his feet, the hate in his colorless eyes unmasked. An ugly lopsided grin tugged at his lips. He stood spraddle-legged and belligerent, both thumbs hooked in his gunbelt.

"Daggett's outlaws is the bunch you rode with one time, ain't it, Lander?" he sneered.

Lander froze. The showdown had come. Anger lashed through him, but when he spoke his words were calm.

"You know that's a lie, Durkin," he said carefully.

"It's what Brock told us."

"You shouldn't believe everything you hear, Durkin."

The lanky trail hand laughed mockingly. "I figured all your big talk was bluff, Lander. There's not an ounce of fight in you."

Lander's balled fist traveled faster than the eye could follow. His entire body was behind the blow. It smashed between Durkin's eyes, almost upending him. He hit the ground, rolled, clawing for his six-shooter. His pistol never left the holster. Nor did the other three stunned trail hands make a move.

Lander's own six-gun was clenched in his fist. The deadly threat in his voice lashed out like a whip:

"You've been asking for that since we started, Durkin! Whatever it is eating on

you fellers will have to wait till we reach Tascosa. Then we'll settled it with fists, guns or marbles. And you write your own ticket. Brock hired you for this trip. But I aim to see that you hang and rattle till the job's done. Then you can go hang yourself for all I care. Is that clear?"

The odds were ludicrously against Lander. For a brief interval a gunsmoke showdown hung by a thread. The cook stared, taking no sides. Near the wagon, his own six-shooter palmed, crouched Chico, backing Lander's hand. Yet the very force of Lander's iron will held the renegades in check. It was as if they sensed in this tall, bitter-eyed trail boss a deathless fighting spirit that they themselves lacked.

The tension broke when Durkin got to his feet. He grinned, but his faded eyes were deep pools of venom.

"You coppered my ace this time, Lander," he growled. "Next time it'll be different."

DURKIN took the first guard, choosing the bull-necked man by the name of Blutchter, to go with him. Lander strode to his horse, catching the warning in Chico's blood-shot eyes.

Stars gleamed, cold and hard, in the wintry night heavens as he looked over the remuda. In the darkness near the herd he stopped, listening. On the far side of the herd he spotted the vague shadows that were Slim Durkin and the other man.

Lander couldn't account for the tingling chill along his spine. He keened the air, senses keyed to explosive pitch. Once, from far off, he thought he heard the furtive sound of moving horses. An icy wind moaned through the trees, like the whisper of dying men. Close by the muddy Pecos, fringed with black brush, seemed to murmur feebly of death.

Lander stiffened. Somewhere a hoof clicked against a loose stone. From up the river came a splashing sound. Lander whirled in the saddle. Slim Durkin and the other guard were gone. From off in the darkness a brush snapped.

A man yelled, a six-shooter blared—and all hell broke loose!

Out of the brush, through the trees, riders suddenly bolted out of the night, guns flaming. Lander, spurring toward

camp, rode the stirrups, all his pent-up emotions tearing from his throat in a stricken yell. His brain seemed afire as he felt the six-shooter buck in his fist.

A rider bolted out of the night toward him, shooting as he came. By some miracle Lander lived, blasting lead into the rider's body, toppling him from the back of his widely swerving horse.

In a thrice the herd was on its feet, stampeding. And in that mêlée of charging riders, gunfire and death, Jim Lander sent his horse hurtling up to the wagon. Bawling, spooked cattle smashed through the camp, heading toward the river. Near the campfire the cook's bullet-riddled body lay sprawled and trampled. Close to the wagon, crouched and shooting at the blurry raiders, was Chico.

He saw Lander and yelled, "Daggett! It's Daggett!"

Limned against the campfire, Lander was an excellent target. As death closed in he made a grab to pull the little Mexican up behind him. He felt the heavy blow of a bullet. Shock and pain poured through him while he bent low in the saddle. It felt as if a red-hot poker had been stabbed through his right shoulder as Chico swung up, grabbing his waist.

Then they were bolting out of the firelight, while a dozen guns tried to down them. In a hail of lead they hit the brush. As if in a nightmare Lander felt Chico's body shudder and heard the Mexican's half-stifled cry of pain.

Out of the darkness toward them swerved a rider. Lander shot first and watched the rider's horse go down in a wild tangle.

Twice Lander reached back to hold Chico astride as they broke free of the death-trap. He used every trick he knew to throw off pursuit—doubling back, keeping to the high brush, then riding full tilt toward the distant hills. And somehow his luck held, but in escaping he found no release from the terrible rage that roweled him.

Giddiness and waves of pain forced him to slow the killing pace. A mile from camp, safe in a rocky arroyo, he all but fell to the ground, dragging Chico with him. Then into his shocked consciousness came the realization that Chico was dead. He knelt on the ground, holding

the little Mexican's head and shoulders in his arms.

Grief shook Lander to the depths of his soul. He forgot his own throbbing wound. For a time he made no move. In the darkness his face was drawn and pale. There was a hard lump in his throat. His words were a ghostly whisper of hate when he finally spoke.

"I'll square with them for this, Chico! Our homestead and well-digging will have to wait."

VI

F AINT from pain, half-frozen, Jim Lander spent the most miserable hours of his life that night. He ripped off his shirt-tail and patched his shoulder wound as best he could. He found the loss of blood had greatly weakened him as he sat shivering, fighting against the creeping shadows of unconsciousness.

Beating through the torture in his brain was the damning knowledge of failure. In losing the herd, he had wiped out the last vestige of hope for his father and the other Pool men. It would be the toughest chore of his life, facing those men now.

For his own salvation, Lander held no hope. All the plans that he and Marta Nolan made were char and ash. His dream of a thriving desert homestead—with water—had gone smash. For years the name of Grif Daggett had blighted his life. Now settling scores with Daggett was all that mattered.

Weakness blotted out the agony of his wound and thoughts. He roused toward dawn, so stiff and shaky he could hardly stand. His shoulder wound shot slivers of fiery pain through his entire body. With a lot of effort he carried Chico's body up to the arroyo rim. He dug a shallow grave in the sand and covered the mound with rocks.

"*Vaya con Dios, Chico,*" he murmured.

He stumbled back into the arroyo and found his horse among some huge boulders. In a rocky hole filled with water he sated his thirst, bathed his face and hands. Then he dragged himself into saddle and topped out a hill.

Far down below him he spotted the camp site. Smoke still rose from the tangled wreckage of the wagon. Buzzards

circled over the carnage, swooping down to feast upon the remains of the dead horses. There were no signs of human life, and the cattle were gone.

Lander knew he stood not a chance of retrieving the herd. Slim Durkin and the other three tough hands had either been killed or had fled. Somewhere up the trail Grif Daggett and his renegades would dispose of the cattle to some furtive beef-buyer who cared not a hoot about brands.

Common sense told Lander to turn back pronto, but he stayed in the rough country, avoiding the river trail. Each step his horse took increased the pain of his wound. There was no sun, and the blasting, frigid wind lashed at him like a monster.

He lost track of time and distance. Fever mounted in his veins and he all but cried out against the terrible pain. At times it seemed as if the rocks and brush were dancing around him in hellish glee. Then there were moments when swirling black shadows engulfed him, and by instinct alone he clung to his horse.

Voices seemed to scream at him, and he'd come to with a start, stifling a moan. By sheer force of will then he clung to consciousness. He tried to sing, but his tongue felt too big for his mouth. Always he managed to keep the river to his left. He tried to judge the distance he had come, but he had no way of knowing.

Panic stole over him as his strength kept ebbing. Try as he would he knew he could never hold out until he reached Bosque Grande—and help. Every tired fiber of his being tempted him to drop to the ground and sleep, but he knew it would be the sleep of no awakening. So he held on, his head slumping down on his chest.

His last recollection was of the horse dipping down into a brushy canyon. As if in a nightmare he thought he heard the barking of a dog. Then a man's voice, hazy and indistinct, filtered into his fleeting consciousness. Strong arms lifted him from the saddle. By dint of iron will alone he found enough strength to stand on his feet as the man guided him inside a 'dobe shack. Then he passed out completely.

IN LURID dreams he relived much of his life. He rolled and tossed, hot with fever, and pleading for water. Once he woke, crying out in delirium. At times he was vaguely conscious of being spooned a vile liquid, of a man's cool hand upon his hot brow. Then came a voice, whispering something to him in Spanish.

Some time later he woke in the dead of night. Outside the wind wailed around the shack. Lander found himself on a crude bunk, covered with blankets. His mind was clear. Across the room, in front of a small fireplace, a man stirred from his blanket.

The man got up, touched a burning stick to a kerosene lamp. He was a stockily-built Mexican with kindly eyes and a tired smile.

"The fever has left, señor," he said humbly. "You will live now."

Lander answered him in Spanish, thanking him for what he had done. "How long have I been here?" he asked.

Three days, the Mexican said, since the señor had ridden up to his lonely goat-herding shack more dead than alive. He said he'd done all he could do. In such cases as this, the matter of life or death rested entirely with the good Dios.

He asked no questions and Lander was glad. All the grief and torment of the past was locked up inside him.

His shoulder wound had been neatly rebandaged. He was terribly weak, but the pain and fever were gone. His face was thin, bearded. In the depths of his sunken eyes there were the mingled emotions of a man who has been through a terrible ordeal.

Next day he ate sparingly of broiled goat meat prepared for him. He walked around to regain the use of his legs. That evening the Mexican corraled his goats. He cooked another meal, talking as a lonely man at times. He cared not for the river villages, he said. He preferred the solitude, the desert.

"You and I are much alike, *compadre*," said Lander.

The Mexican smiled. "The desert is good for the soul of man," he murmured. "It brings peace to man's heart."

Lander smiled bitterly, but said nothing. In him was a gnawing urge to hurry

back to La Luz. Word of the raid had unquestionably gone ahead of him. He would offer no alibis. He'd leave the basin. Somewhere, sometime, he would cut Grif Daggett's trail. To that meeting he dedicated his every thought.

Two more days dragged past before Lander found the strength to go on. Even then he was as weak as a kitten. He looked like a caricature of his former self as he got on his horse. Again he thanked the Mexican and took his leave.

He rode the day through, camping that night in the brushy flats above Bosque Grande.

The Mexican had supplied him with food and water. At crack of dawn he was up, his eyes set on the snowy, timbered peaks of the Guadalupe. That night he camped in the high timber where the snow was piled deep.

Again the storm-tossed currents of unrest deprived him of much sleep. When daylight broke he was in saddle, riding through the snow as fast as his mount could carry him.

It was almost noon when he came in sight of the Broken B ranch buildings. Icy dread clutched at his heart. Then he spotted his father, bundled in blankets, sitting in a chair on the front porch. Beside the oldster stood Doc Beeson, staring.

Lander wheeled up before them. One glance into his sire's blazing eyes and he knew nothing he could say would ever rectify matters.

He began hoarsely, "I guess I failed you, Dad."

Slowly, very slowly, old Barney Lander lifted his huge frame out of the chair, stood trembling, the rage in his eyes like an unvoiced curse. Doc Beeson tried to quiet him, but he slapped the doctor aside without turning his head.

HIS voice, tremulous with passion, lashed out wrathfully, "Yes, you failed, Jim. You've wrecked my life—cost me my ranch and the ranches of the other men! But more than that you've stooped to the lowest, rottenest thing a man could do. And now you've got the gall to ride back!"

"Dad! I—"

"Don't try to explain, Jim! I know now

that every belly-crawling thing I ever heard about you is true. Brock broke the news to me of all that's happened. Get out of my sight, Jim! You've fetched me all the disgrace one man can stand. Get out of the country. And never come back!"

Old Barney Lander was still shouting hoarsely, sinking spent and beaten into his chair, as Lander rode away. He took the trail to town, hardly knowing why. On a high point he spotted the vast reach of the desert basin below, then he turned his horse down the slope.

He couldn't force himself to see Marta Nolan. Down there at his ranch he'd get a few supplies. Before anyone else could learn of his whereabouts, he'd head north.

On the basin floor he guided his horse through the mesquite-topped sand hills. He breathed deeply of the cold dry air. Bitterly he realized that again he'd have to leave this land of his, perhaps this time forever. But he'd never forget it, nor would he forget Chico Morales.

As Lander wheeled up at the door of his house he didn't see the three men and their horses at the rear. He slid to the ground. Then as boot heels crunched in the sand he turned.

"Howdy, Jeff," he said.

Sheriff Jeff Nolan, Webb McCann and Brock Lander came around the corner of the house. Brock and Webb McCann had cocked six-shooters in their fists. The old rancher's square-jawed face was livid and his eyes were hot with man-killing passion. Brock's handsome face was a stony mask. His lips were twisted in an ugly smile of triumph.

Squatty Jeff Nolan said grimly, "Might as well get back on your horse, Jim. I kind of figured you'd come back here."

Lander stood stunned. "Jeff! What's up?"

"Cut out the dramatics, Jim!" Brock broke in. "You're under arrest for one of the lowest crimes a man can commit. How you ever figured you could get by with it is beyond me. Slim Durkin and his men got into town two days ago. One of them was wounded in the raid."

"So was I, Brock!"

"It's a shame you weren't killed on the spot, Jim!" Brock rasped. "You might as well admit everything. We've got the

evidence and proof. Near Fort Sumner you said you were riding into town—you and the little Mex. When you came back to camp you brought Grif Daggett's bunch with you. Durkin and his men managed to escape with their lives, even though you tried for a complete wipe-out."

Lander stood there, his senses numb, quivering inside with a terrible nausea.

"That's a lie, Jeff!" he managed.

"There's the testimony of four men against you, Jeff," Brock sneered. "Also the beef-buyer from Tascosa. We telegraphed him, had him describe the man he bought the cattle from. His description tallied with you exactly. There's an old saying that once a crook, always one. What did you do with the beef money, Jim? Did you split it with Daggett?"

Blind to the gun-threat, Lander lunged forward. For the first time in his life he wanted to smash and kill the man who was his foster brother. Sheriff Nolan grabbed him, snatching the six-shooter from Lander's holster.

"Come with me, Jim!" he commanded. "Don't muddy up the trouble any more. I've got a bench warrant for your arrest, signed by McCann here and the other Pool men. Don't make it any tougher on me than necessary."

WEBB McCANN had not spoken. But his eyes spoke louder than words, of contempt and hate for Jim Lander whose treachery had bankrupted him and the other Pool men.

"Let's go, Jim," muttered the lawman.

Lander turned, too dazed and hurt to argue. He got on his horse and rode into town with the other men. He rode like a dead man, staring straight ahead, a bearded, gaunt scarecrow of his former self. Along the street he was dully conscious of people staring at him, whispering. As they passed one of the saloons he saw Slim Durkin come to the doorway. But Lander was too sick and tired of body and soul to care.

Sheriff Nolan took him inside the 'dobe jail building. He escorted Lander to a cell and locked the door. When Nolan turned away he looked as if he had aged fifteen years.

That afternoon Marta Nolan came to see Lander. She stood outside the barred door, struggling to hold back the tears.

Bewildered, hurt, she was trying to bear up under the burden of her grief.

"You didn't do it, did you, Jim?" she whispered tragically.

"No, Marta."

"Then tell them exactly what happened Jim! They'll have to listen to reason. Oh, Jim, Jim!"

At last Sheriff Nolan led his daughter away and Lander stood staring after her, the rage and hate inside him a consuming flame. Brock, he knew, had leaped at this opportunity to wreck his life. Slim Durkin and the other trail hands, employed by Brock, had returned to La Luz with a story that would forever brand Lander's name with the stigma of traitor.

There was much that Lander didn't understand. Brock knew what had happened. He was playing a snake's game. But in trying to prove it, Lander knew that he himself would be ramming his head against a brick wall.

Lander slept but little that night, either. At the crack of day Sheriff Nolan came to the cell.

"I spent the night with your father, Jim," he said heavily. "Because of him I got McCann and the others to drop the charges ag'in you. They did it for Barney's sake alone. Sending you to the pen wouldn't change things. They're wiped out—broke. Brock is trying to be lenient with them, but in the end everything they own will go to him. Old Barney is turning the reins of the ranch over to Brock. His only request is that you leave the country and never return. He wants you to change your name."

"You believe the charges against me, Jeff?"

The old lawman said slowly, "Jim, I don't know what to believe. All the evidence is ag'in you."

"And Marta?"

"You'll have to forget her, Jim."

Lander walked out of the jail that morning a free man. His saddled horse was outside waiting for him. On another horse sat Doc Beeson, paler than ever, his eyes bloodshot from too much whisky.

As Lander mounted he knew that dozens of people stood in the doorways watching him. Their ugly whispering was mockery in his ears. He was being banished, disgraced.

Doc Beeson said quietly, "Ready, Jim?"

"Where you going, Doc?"

There was a reckless grin on the old medico's pallid lips. "Going to kind of tag along, if you don't mind. The liquor's rotten in this town and some of the people are rottener. I always had a hankering to see what's over the next hill."

VII

JIM LANDER offered no protest as to the strange actions of Doc Beeson as the little medico rode out of town with him. He cut across the foothills, heading straight south for the Mexican border.

It rained that morning, a chill, biting rain that turned to sleet. But Doc Beeson had brought slickers for them, blankets, and enough food to last them for a day or so.

Lander rode in silence for the most part, pondering the black future ahead. He started at the sound of the medico's voice.

"What did you do with the trail herd money, Jim?"

Lander turned, his face hard. "You believe I stooped to such a thing, Doc?" he rapped.

Doc Beeson was grinning. "Just wanted to see if you still had some fight in you, Jim! A man's never down as long as he's willing to fight. That's what you've got to do, son. Why beat around the bush? You and I both know Brock double-crossed you. From the first he's hated you. I don't know how he worked it, but he fixed you good and proper, just so he could grab the Broken B and the other ranches without interference from you."

"I know that, Doc. But proving it is something else."

"Brock is rotten, Jim. Rotten to the core. But he's got old Barney and a lot of others believing in him. The dirty, hypocritical son! He's as upright as a telegraph pole around La Luz but I happen to know that he sneaks down here to the Border for his drinking and deviltries!"

"I've heard that too, Doc."

"It ain't hearsay with me, Jim. I've choused around this country a little myself. Across the river I've got an old amigo who'd cut your heart out if you turned a trick against him. But he'd fight a buzz-saw to help if you were his friend."

He runs a cantina called the Halfway House. It's as tough a dive as you'd find anywhere, but if you're Blackie Mendoza's friend, you're all right. You can have a price on your head in big figures, but if you oil the old boy's palm you can ride in and out at will.

"He deals in rotgut whisky, and has his fingers in most of the Border-hopping deals. But, like I say, if he likes you, you're all set. He put me up when I first hit the Border. After nursing him through a siege of smallpox he took me under his wing. He knows Brock from the old days in Mexico, and hates his guts. Folks in La Luz don't know it, but Brock has sneaked down here for his sprees. Following me, Jim?"

"Go ahead, Doc."

"Brock has been going to the Halfway House, gambling big money. And making eyes at a good-looking half-breed señorita that happens to be Blackie Mendoza's third cousin. How Brock has kept from getting his throat slit before now I'll never understand. I thought you might like to know all this, Jim. It might pay us to hunker down at Mendoza's and keep an eye on your double-dealing foster brother."

"I've heard all that before, Doc—from Chico. Chico used to hit for the Halfway House occasionally. He's seen Brock there, but Brock never spotted Chico. That's why I'm headed for the Border. We'll hide out at Mendoza's if he'll put us up. Some day that outlaw chief, Grif Daggett—or Brock—will drop in. If they do, maybe we can learn something."

They waited till nightfall, then crossed the river, riding cautiously through the salt cedar that fringed the Mexican bank. Overhead in the blue-black heavens stars glittered, shedding a ghostly pallor over the rolling, brush-dotted country. Back among some scrubby cottonwoods a sprawling low-roofed cantina came into view, its dirty windows blurry with light.

There were several 'dobe outbuildings and a huge corral hugging the main building. For years this had been disputed land, claimed by both Mexico and Texas. The course of the Rio Grande had changed during a flood. It had been said that the cantina was half in Mexico, half in Texas, but Blackie Mendoza had taken the place over, established his own law. And Mexi-

can rurales and Texas rangers, figuring this as no man's land, had left Mendoza alone.

SEVERAL saddle horses stood in the shadows outside the half-doors. From inside came the tinkle of a guitar. A Mexican girl was singing, her voice carrying out into the darkness where vague figures moved like wraiths around the buildings.

No challenge greeted Lander and the medico as they circled the main building. As they dismounted inside the walled patio, Lander had the prickling sensation of being watched. Doc Beeson boldly led the way through a rear door. Beyond them stretched a dark corridor, opening into the barroom in front.

Lander caught a glimpse of the girl who was singing. She was standing on a table, surrounded by Mexican vaqueros. Other men lined the long bar—tough-visaged, heavily armed gringos and mestizos. Here were gunmen and thieves, Border-hoppers and a sprinkling of reckless cowpunchers, mostly the dregs of a lawless Border.

Doc Beeson said softly, "Step into this room and wait for me, Jim."

A side door gave to Lander's touch. He stepped inside a windowless room. In one corner a low-turned lamp burned on top a battered dresser. There were two beds, neatly covered with gaudy Mexican blankets. A knotty mesquite fire smoldered in an ancient fireplace, and in front of it stood two cowhide chairs.

After several minutes Doc Beeson entered the room, followed by a thick-set, pockmarked man with eyes like a vulture. His pants were doeskin charro, his boots highly polished. The red shirt he wore was open at the throat, revealing a thick, hairy chest. Two pearl-handled six-shooters swung low at each hip.

Doc Beeson grinned. "Jim," he said, "this is Blackie Mendoza, cutthroat, revolutionist unchanged, charmer of the opposite sex, and a good friend."

Blackie Mendoza smiled and offered his hand. He was patently all Doc Beeson had said of him but Lander liked his cold level way of putting things.

"My humble cantina is yours, Señor Lander. Any friend of the Dr. Beeson is

always welcome. To him I owe my life. He has mentioned the trouble you're in. Count on me to do all I can to help."

Doc Beeson went into more detail as to why they were there. They didn't want their presence known to those who visited the barroom. Some day Grif Daggett or Brock Lander would appear. They had business with them.

Blackie Mendoza, wise in the art of Border intrigue, smiled and shrugged. "Your wishes are my command, Doctor," he said.

Doc Beeson got drunk that night. Lander went to bed early. Waiting, he knew, would be the hardest.

Next day and the days that followed they spent most of their time in the room, or in the patio at the rear. A mozo served them excellent meals of fresh game. Of lonely nights Lander often sat alone, brooding. Then he'd pace the floor, finding no surcease from the terrible hate and restlessness inside him.

After several days he said, "I can't stand this waiting, Doc. I've got to ride on."

"Wait, Jim," Doc Beeson pleaded.

Nights were the longest. Nights when the muted sounds of men's voices mingled with the tinkle of guitars. Nights when Lander tried futilely to shake Marta Nolan's lovely image, but knowing he never could. Nights filled the grotesque dreams raging at him, pointing scornfully, and impish figures were laughing crazily.

Then came the night of muted gunfire, when Doc Beeson came back to the room and there was blood on his long fingers.

"Two men just died out there, Jim," he said shakily.

But Lander was not interested in the quarrels of others.

OCCASIONALLY Blackie Mendoza visited the room, but he had little to say. Only once did he mention the two men Lander sought.

"I know Grif Daggett, Señor Lander, also your foster-brother, Brock. Beneath the skin they are the same. Often in the past they have met here to drink and talk."

"Then they know one another?" Lander asked quickly.

Blackie Mendoza shrugged. "What else, señor?"

Beyond that the Mexican would say little. But suspicions hammered through the turmoil of Lander's brain.

"I'll wait another day, Doc!" he said. "Then if neither Brock or Daggett show up, I'm heading back to La Luz!"

"Jim! Don't go off half-cocked!"

"I don't aim to, Doc."

It was the next night when Doc Beeson hurried back inside the room that he was trembling with excitement as he told Lander of several riders pulling up in front a few minutes before. One of the men had dismounted and come into the barroom. The others had ridden off toward the river.

"He's in the barroom now, Jim. One of the tough hombres that Brock hired to go on the trail drive with you."

"Which one?"

"The bull-necked, beady-eyed feller who wore the brown hat."

Lander remembered the man, the quiet, surly gunhand who had gone by the name of Blutcher.

"Blackie caught only a glimpse of the others as they rode away. He thought one of the men was Grif Daggett!"

"And they headed for the river?"

"Yep!"

"Did Blutcher spot you?"

"Nope. I ducked back out of sight when he came in the front door."

Lander's mind spun. He knew intuitively now that his days of waiting were over. He pulled on his coat and hat, tightening the gunbelt around his waist.

Reaching the door he turned and said, "Stay behind me, Doc. This is my show now. Watch and listen, and pray that I'm on the right trail."

He stepped out into the corridor, walked unhurriedly toward the barroom. Ahead of him he saw several customers leaning over the bar. Babble of profane talk came from them. A Mexican girl laughed shrilly. Two sweaty barkeepers were putting out bottles and glasses. Four men sat at one of the gaming tables. One of the men had his arm around the Mexican girl. Close to the table stood Blackie Mendoza, his back to the wall, watching.

For a second Lander paused in the barroom portal. His glance swept across the staring faces. Blutcher was gulping a drink, his back half-turned. Lander moved along the bar toward him, his

spurs jangling in the sudden hush.

Like a coyote sensing trouble, Blutchter whirled, eyes bulging out of his grizzled, hard-lined face. He set down his empty glass and his lips moved, but no sound came.

Lander's voice was metallic. "Where did Grif Daggett go, Blutchter?"

Fear was eating into the gunman's eyes. "Why, Lander, I didn't figure I'd meet you here."

"Where'd they go, Blutchter?"

"I—I don't know, Lander."

"You were in on the doublecross deal, Blutchter. You're either talking—or fighting! Take your choice!"

Blutchter took a step forward, a cold, clammy terror washing across his ugly face. Wildly he looked about for help, but there was none. From the wall came Blackie Mendoza's voice, flat, deadly:

"Talk or fight, Blutchter."

The gunman must have known he was going to die, either way. Like a snarling, trapped coyote he went for his gun, crouching and cursing.

LANDER made one of the fastest draws of his life. His six-shooter streaked level, flaming. Blutchter's shot went into the floor at his feet as a bullet tore through his arm. He half-spun, the pistol dropping from his hand. Then Lander was on him, smashing him to the floor with rock-hard fists.

Blutchter fought and rolled, but Lander leaped back on him. His steely fingers found the gunman's throat. With all his savage strength unleashed, Lander squeezed until Blutchter's eyes rolled whitely in his bloated face. When he made a gurgling sound, trying to talk, Lander slackened his death grip.

"Don't kill me—Lander! My gawd, I'm bleeding to death! I was to—wait here for Brock in case he showed up. He's the snake who framed the whole—deal on you. I just done what I was told. Daggett and Brock fixed it up—to raid the herd and sell it. Brock was to meet us here and pay off. But he ain't showed up, so Grif Daggett and the others went after him—"

Lander leaped to his feet, ignoring the gunman. He scooped up his own six-shooter, spotting Doc Beeson among the group of onlookers.

"Let's go, Doc! We're taking Blutchter along with us. Get some rope to tie him. We're heading for La Luz!"

VIII

ROUGHLY Lander dragged the whimpering outlaw out to his horse. It took Jim and Doc Beeson only a few minutes to tie the prisoner's hands behind him, then rope him in the saddle.

A mozo had Lander's and Doc Beeson's horses ready for them. They swung astride, leading Blutchter's horse. Lander set the pace, barely slowing when they hit the river. Blutchter alternately cursed, raged and whined.

Doc Beeson cackled gleefully. "It's nothing but a scratch, Jim. Keep going. Don't waste any time on him. We ought to hit town about dawn. Then for the fireworks!"

It seemed to Lander one of the longest rides of his life. He clung avidly to the hope that his hunches were right, that by some miracle he could clear his name. The desert beyond La Luz was his home. The people there, with all their faults, were his kind.

"I knew we'd learn the truth, Jim!" Doc Beeson gloated. "I knew it! Damn Brock's black heart!"

The stars dimmed. In the timbered foothills they came upon patches of snow, and the night air cut through them like a cruel knife. Lander shivered, stiff, numb and cold. But transcending all physical comfort was the knowledge that he was riding back to pay off the debt he owed Chico, to lift the black stigma of traitor from his own name.

Along the eastern rim of the pine-dotted hills the sky turned to gray as Lander, Doc Beeson and his prisoner hit the outskirts of La Luz. Lander headed straight for Sheriff Nolan's house, wheeling his jaded horse up in the yard. Then he was on the porch, rapping on the door.

Sheriff Nolan came to the door, tucking his nightshirt into his pants and pulling on his boots.

"Jim!" he snapped, in surprise. "What's happened?"

"Come with me, Jeff! Don't ask questions now. Hurry!"

The lawman ran back into the house.

Lander was back on his horse as Sheriff Nolan hurried out the door, buckling on his six-shooter. Marta appeared in the doorway, her startled cry carrying through the early dawn.

"Jim! Jim!"

But Lander was already riding down the street, with Doc Beeson and his prisoner on horseback following. And running behind them came Sheriff Nolan, too flabbergasted for words. In the half-darkness Lander turned off the street, riding at a walk behind the buildings near the center of town.

Ahead of him stood Brock's store, like a huge monument to one man's treachery. Several hundred yards behind it, half-hidden in some brush, stood three saddled horses. Lander spotted them, and a frantic clamoring shook him. For he knew now that Grif Daggett and two of his outlaw band were inside the store!

For years Brock had lived in a large ornately furnished room at the rear of the building. It was here that Lander figured the showdown would come. He slipped off his horse, eyes raking the dark building as Sheriff Nolan reached his side.

Ten feet away Doc Beeson had a six-shooter stuck in Blutchers' side.

"Make a sound and I'll kill you, Bull-neck!" the medico whispered.

The lawman croaked, "Jim, I don't savor this."

Every nerve like a taut wire, Lander was moving through the shadows. He passed some cellar steps—and froze! Below him the cellar door was closed, but slivers of yellow light filtered out through cracks in the planks.

Then men's voices, vibrant with anger, stabbed into Lander's consciousness like dagger thrusts!

"I'll have it for you tomorrow, Grif!" Brock was saying. "Get out of here, you fool! We can't be found together like this. I'll meet you at the Halfway House tomorrow night."

Then Slim Durkin's voice, threatening and snarling. "You was to meet us there tonight, Brock. We aim to have that herd money before we leave. The deal was that you'd foreclose and get the ranches and we'd get the beef money. Looks like you're playing a snake's game, Brock."

LANDER hit the cellar door with the full force of his shoulder.

"He is, Durkin!" he yelled. "Same as you and those other two gunhands! This is the end of your crookedness, Brock. One of us is coming out of here feet first!"

For a heart-tick the world stood still. Brock Lander, in pants, shirt and boots, stood like a man face to face with a ghost, one hand on his six-shooter. His face twitched, not handsome now, but reflecting all the cruelty and cunning of a natural born killer. Near him Slim Durkin, and the other two men who had gone up the trail with Lander, stood like statues.

Then Death rang a bell, and gun thunder shook the cellar walls. With the odds against him, Lander flung himself to the floor, even as his six-shooter spewed death.

Never afterward was he able to remember what transpired in those moments of fury. He was part of a maelstrom of violence, cursing as lead laid sharp agony along the side of his head, further whetting his lust to kill.

Through the smoke he saw Brock, his face a twisted mask of evil, stumble and go down—down as only a dying man falls. Slim Durkin, back to the wall, was done, a bullet through his chest. One of the other owlhoots had his hands in the air, yelling for mercy. The other lay sprawled on the stone floor.

In the cellar doorway crouched Sheriff Jeff Nolan, six-shooter clenched in his fist. Blood streamed down the old lawman's cheek from a bullet gash.

"Jim!" he yelled hoarsely. "Jim, are you all right?"

Reeling dazedly, Lander got to his feet and tossed the six-shooter to one side. He walked up the steps past Sheriff Nolan, up into the clean air of early dawn. Doc Beeson was yelling, trying to stop him, but Lander reached the street. The shouts and clamor of the aroused town made no impression upon him.

He stalked up the street as if in a dream, struggling to clear up his mind. When he saw Marta running toward him he stopped. She was crying, saying things that were not clear to Lander. Behind her the wintry sun was topping the hills. Her hair, he thought, is like spun gold.

"I just paid off a debt, Marta," he heard

himself say. "One that I owed Chico Morales. Brock framed the herd raid and he's dead. I killed him."

"Jim!" Marta sobbed. "But you're back! Oh, I'm glad—glad!"

She grabbed him as he started to fall. She sank to the footpath with him, holding his head in her arms. With a strip of cloth torn from her skirt, she staunched the bullet gash along the side of his head.

And that is the way her father and the townspeople found her, with the confusion subsided. Marta was holding Lander close, rocking him gently. There were no tears; no hysteria.

She said softly, "He's all right, Dad."

"I'm mighty glad, Marta," the old lawman said huskily. He's going to find he's got a lot of plumb good friends here. Word has already been sent to his father and the other Pool men." He paused, then said, "Reckon you'd like to know all about it. Well, Brock got into trouble in Mexico with Grif Daggett's bunch. That's one reason he came up here. Slim Durkin was just a name that Daggett sometimes used. Months ago Daggett and his men rode into this town to blackmail Brock, but Brock talked them out of it and proposed stealing the Pool herd. The man who posed as a beef buyer in Tascosa was one of Daggett's bunch."

Sheriff Nolan explained how Daggett had planned with the rest of his owlhoots to run off the herd near Fort Sumner. After the raid they had hurried the cattle on through to Tascosa, selling them at a good price. The money was paid over to Brock, as agreed, and Brock was to add three thousand dollars of his own money to it. He was to wait until every member of Daggett's bunch could get together at the Halfway House, then divide it among them. But Brock had failed to appear.

GRIF DAGGETT, mortally wounded, had lived long enough to confess everything. It was the same story that Doc Beeson's prisoner, Blutchter, was telling a group of men in front of the jail—while begging for mercy.

Old Barney Lander drove his buckboard into town the instant the news reached him. He and other Pool men met Jim Lander at the sheriff's house. None of them was the kind to get down on their knees and apologize, but they were big men, big in body and soul, and fine enough to acknowledge their mistakes.

Old Barney was still weak, after pneumonia, but he was on the road to complete recovery. He shook Jim's hand; he looked at Marta whose eyes were bright with all the promise and devotion that a woman can bestow upon a man. And for the first time in years Old Barney Lander smiled, while his eyes grew suspiciously misty.

"They found our money in Brock's safe, Jim," he said. "It means that every man-jack of us can go ahead. The Broken B is home to you, if you want to make it such. We've all kind of kicked in for a wedding present for you and Marta. It ain't much, but it'll be enough to dig you a well or two out there in the desert. Still think you'll hang onto that homestead?"

"You bet we're going to, Barney," Marta spoke up.

"That's right, Dad," Jim said, grinning. "You see, we kind of like the desert. I figure we'll hit water there some day."

Doc Beeson stood close by, proud as a man could be—a little drunk, mayhap, but not too drunk.

"And I'll bet my horse against that shirt you're wearing, Barney, that he does."

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Rank meant nothing to this ex-lieutenant colonel when it came to combatting thousands of wild warrior Indians . . .

I

IUT in the darkness of the Wyoming hills, the vengeful Sioux, Arapahoes and Cheyennes, two thousand warriors of three tribes united in hatred of the white men, watched the lights of a small army fort. Its garrison was celebrating the completion of the fort. There had been the driving of the last few nails in stockade and quarters, the raising of the post flag, and the chance, at last, to cease

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heavy labor with ax, saw, shovel and pick. There would now be some protection against the continuous forays of Red Cloud and his warriors.

There was the sound of singing from the barracks. The music of a quadrille floated down from upstairs in headquarters where the officers wore full dress, blue-and-gold, and the ladies in bright-colored ball gowns, cut and sewn by themselves from the newest paper patterns from the East.

Laughter floated down from the stairs from the ballroom to where Colonel Barrington stood with old Ben Tonger, the civilian scout. There was no laughter in the talk between these two. They were of an age that retained few illusions.

"We found his body staked to the wagon wheel," Ben Tonger said somberly. "The Injuns had done their usual devilment—each arm and leg burned off separate and at the last a blaze kindled on his chest fed slow, to make the agony last longer!"

The colonel made no answer, his thoughts dwelling upon that small post graveyard, which had so steadily been enlarged by the remorseless forays of Red Cloud and his band.

"At least we've got a few more replacements, Ben," the colonel said at last, referring to reinforcements which had arrived that day.

"Ninety-five infantry recruits and A Company of the Second Cavalry," Ben said. "But what good are them recruits, sir, armed just like the rest of the sodgers here with them old-fashioned muzzle-loadin' Springfields? A Sioux jumps in and makes off with his scalp before ever the poor devil has time to reload and fire!"

"I know," said the colonel. "I've stormed, and begged, practically on bended knees, for the new breechloading carbines, even if they are single-shot. The only thing I can do is to sit tight and to keep my young officers from being too impetuous."

GLOOMILY the scout stared at the distant line of hills. "Trouble is, Colonel," he said, "them young officers of your'n don't know a thing about fighting Injuns. Them fellers who been fightin' down South are crazy! Look at Captain Manson, him that boasts that he can march through the whole Sioux nation with eighty men. And Captain Balfour, who's aiming to get Red

Cloud's scalp before he leaves for recruiting duty in the East. And Loot'nent Bremer. If you hadn't hauled him out of that fracas on Pine Hill, he'd sure been minus his hair. But does that teach him anything? Not by a jugful it don't!"

"Well, you can't blame them much. They're young, and they want promotion."

Colonel Barrington was indulgent. But the worry that seldom left him returned as he gazed out over the stockade at the distant hills.

"I imagine that right at this minute there are half a hundred warriors watching the lights, waiting for a chance to strike!"

"You're right, Colonel, except I'd say half a thousand," said old Ben Tonger, sniffing the evening air as though he could smell the hostile braves outside the stockade.

The disquiet of the two older men certainly was not reflected by the younger officers gaily stepping with their partners through the quadrille. The music halted and they led the ladies to their seats and dutifully brought them lemonades. Then they gathered in the adjutant's office, where there was a demijohn of whisky and an array of tin cups and two boxes of cigars.

They drank a toast to Captain Beaumont of the Second Cavalry, who'd arrived that day with sixty-five men and horses.

"It's good to see the yellow legs arrive," one of them, Captain Balfour, said. "My infantry can't tell one end of the horse from the other. They don't catch on very quickly!"

"It's important to know one end of a horse from the other," admitted Beaumont, a small, active and wiry officer, with a face tanned to mahogany. "I remember the young lady down at Fort Laramie who tried to flatter old Captain Muller one day. 'Captain,' she gushed, 'you are a marvelous rider. You look as though you were part of your horse!' 'Vot part?' asked old Muller indignantly!"

As the laughter subsided Captain Manson asked, "Did you have any brushes with the Sioux?"

"No, they just circled around us. Once or twice we thought they were going to attack but they held off. Personally I'd say there are too many Sioux hanging

around us for comfort. I wish I had a few more men!"

Young Summers, the adjutant, suddenly sat bolt upright.

"Oh-ho!" he exclaimed. "That reminds me. There's a new man wanting to join up. I clean forgot him. Captain Beaumont, he wants to join up with your cavalry company."

"Fine! Fine! Has he had any previous service?"

"I believe so—he carries himself like a soldier. Might even have been an officer. Said something about having been in the horse artillery, some New York battery, I believe."

"Horse artillery? An officer?" Lieutenant Bill Bremer looked up, curious. "What sort of a looking fellow is he?"

"Pretty decent looking—self-contained, soldierly, tall—"

"Horse artillery!" Captain Beaumont interrupted. "A wagon soldier, eh? Well, he won't fall out of the saddle at his first drill."

But Summers had departed. Beaumont looked after him then, since the new man was to be in his company, he followed.

The man who rose as Summers came in to the ante-room where he was waiting, possessed that certain air which betokens military service. As Captain Beaumont followed Summers, the man gazed at him tranquilly. Captain Beaumont took out his handkerchief, mopped his brow and sat down.

Summers was reading off the enlistment blank questions, with the clerk writing down the answers.

"Birth place? Parents' names? Age, weight, color of hair and eyes? Height? Any distinguishing marks?"

"The surgeon has already filled that in," said the clerk. "Sabre cut on right shoulder."

"Where'd you get that?" Summers asked quickly.

"Shiloh, sir," the man said.

"Do you spell your name with a final 'e'?" asked the clerk.

"Yes, B, double o, n, e—Miles Boone," answered the new man.

"Ever commit any felonies in civil life?" Summers asked.

"None, sir."

"Have you had prior service?"

MILES BOONE'S answer came after an almost indistinguishable pause.

"Yes, sir."

"What organization?"

"Battery A, New York Artillery, sir."

"What rank?"

"Captain, sir."

"Any brevet rank?"

"Lieutenant Colonel, sir!"

"What was the quality of your discharge?"

"I resigned, sir."

"Under pressure?"

"Yes—to keep from having to testify at a court martial concerning the reason for my dueling with another officer, sir."

"Oh!" said Summers, then hurriedly gathered the papers together and reached for the small brown volume of Army Regulations and turned to the right page. Miles Boone raised his right hand. The oath was administered.

"That's all," said Summers. "You can report to A Company, Second Cavalry."

"I'll take him down, Summers," said Captain Beaumont quietly.

The adjutant looked surprised. "Very well, Captain."

Outside the headquarters building, Miles Boone fell in on the left of his new captain and into step with him.

"This is a surprise, Miles!" said Captain Beaumont.

"I hadn't the slightest idea you were here."

"It did my heart good to see you. It's been a long time since we rode together at Manassas and the Battle of the Wilderness, before you transferred over to the artillery. You gave me my first promotion, to corporal. I've come up since then."

"And I'm glad, for no one deserved it more!" said Miles Boone, with the first warmth he had shown.

"It's a strange thing your being assigned to my company. You don't mind, do you?"

"No."

"It was a brutal thing," said Beaumont. "I grow angry every time I think of it. Have you ever done anything about it?"

"No, nothing to do, except kill the fellow. And what's the good of that?"

A silence fell between them until they were a third of the way across the parade ground.

"At the same time, I wish I could have warned you before you enlisted. Did you

know that Bill Bremer is here?"

"No!" Miles Boone spoke sharply.

"Yes. I thought you knew it and had come to hunt him out and punish him."

"It's a queer thing how things from the past keep bobbing up," said Miles Boone.

"And the worst of it is, he has just been attached to my company; A Company being short of officers!"

"That sort of complicates matters," observed Boone, quietly.

They came to the far end of the line of log barracks and Captain Beaumont called in through the window of the lighted orderly room. The first sergeant came out, knocking the dottle out of his pipe and buttoning his shirt.

"Sergeant Kane, this is a new man just enlisted for A. Take care of him."

"Very well, sir." Captain Beaumont turned and strode away into the darkness.

"What's your name?" asked Kane.

"Boone."

Grunting something, the first sergeant led the new man into the barracks, redolent of pinewood from the fresh peeled logs of which it was built. Doubledeck bunks ran along the walls, leaving place in the center for arm racks and a long table at which men were playing cards.

Sergeant Kane pointed out a bunk for the new soldier, then asked him if he'd had previous service and in what branches.

"Cavalry and horse artillery," answered Boone.

"Ah, you've been a wagon soldier, as well?" said Kane. "Then I'll not have to be teaching you your drill, how to handle a gun and obey orders."

BOONE was turned over to another sergeant who took him to the store-room and supplied him with full equipment.

"And be sure if ye lose any of this, 'twill always be found—on the pa-ay roll!" The Irish sergeant rid himself of the new man.

The men paid little attention to Boone, for which he was glad. Some were stretched on their bunks asleep. Others, near Boone, were talking about the infantry recruits received that week.

"And not wad of thim wid a dacint breech-loadin' rifle, jist the ould single shot muzzle-loaders," said a soldier.

"And trying to load and fire them old cannon against the Injuns using repeating rifles!" marveled another man.

An occasional appraising glance was cast at Boone as he silently folded his uniforms and clothing in businesslike fashion, stowing away his belongings in the locker at the foot of his bunk and hanging saber, cartridge belt and equipment in regulation manner.

Plainly the new man was no raw recruit, and they forebore from the hazing ordinarily administered to the green and uncouth. Also there was something about Boone's quiet eyes and the cut of his jaw that forbade any undue familiarity.

As for Boone, sufficiently used to military life to know that a new man should keep his mouth shut, he enjoyed the privacy afforded him. He had been profoundly shocked at discovering that Lieutenant Bremer was here. The name brought a memory out of the past that afforded him nothing but distaste.

Just how this bitter feud would work out, with Bremer over him as an officer, he could not foresee. Wisely he put it out of his mind and slept.

II

AT REVEILLE, roll call was held. The men's voices carried sharply across the snowy parade ground as they answered their names. First Sergeant Kane, who had not been too unpleasant the night before, kept gazing at Boone grimly, but Boone could not determine the reason.

After the fatigue and guard details had been read off, the sergeant took a slip of paper and called out:

"Private Miles Boone is hereby promoted to sergeant as of this date, by order of the Company Commander. Dismiss!"

Miles Boone took the news stoically enough outwardly, but he was inwardly upset as he took his mess-kit and joined the chow line for breakfast. He knew that the men of his company would be suspicious, viewing it as a plain case of favoritism, believing older members of the outfit were more deserving of promotion.

He waited somewhat grimly for the trouble that was certain to fall upon him. Sergeant Kane stopped and spoke to him in low tones.

"You had best get your chevrons on quickly," he said, "and sew them on lightly, for they'll not be long there unless yourself is able to hold on to them with

you. If you ain't man enough for that, turn them in now!"

"I'm going to hold on to them," said Boone, but Sergeant Kane was unimpressed.

The new sergeant had not long to wait for the first overt act. Returning to the barracks to ready himself for stable call, he found the contents of his locker scattered all over the earthen floor around his bunk. Men gazed at him expectantly. There was an electric tension in the air.

He thought, Now, at least I will find out whom I have to fight!

He looked around the faces staring at him and waited, knowing that his belligerent would soon identify himself, would not rest content with silence.

His eye came to rest at last upon a bullet-headed, thick-chested hunk of a man with unusually long and apelike arms. Fighter was written all over him, from a slightly cauliflowered ear to a nose that had been half-flattened in some barroom brawl.

"Some one was looking in your locker to try and find out how you got promoted so quick," the man said heavily.

"Yes?" answered Boone.

"Most of us think chevrons should be earned and not won by bootlicking!" the man went on.

Boone noted two things—first, that there were the marks of recently removed chevrons on the man's blouse, and second, that his face was lined with the small red veins of a chronic drinker.

"Are you asking me to rid myself of these chevrons as you rid yourself of yours, by sniffing too heavily of John Barleycorn?" asked Boone.

"The man is nimble with his tongue!" marveled the ex-sergeant. "Will you show me if you're as nimble with your fists?"

By all means," returned Boone, gravely. "Tell me when and where."

"How about the quartermaster shed after retreat?" asked the ex-sergeant, heavily sarcastic.

"It would be a pleasure!" said Boone.

The sharp notes of stable call broke upon the air. Men gathered curry combs and brushes, piled out of the barracks, and were marched down to the stables.

Sergeant Kane beckoned Boone and led him down to a bay horse which laid its ears back wickedly at sight of them.

"He's all yours, and no angel, but I take

it you can ride!" said Kane, then watched the quiet way in which the new sergeant laid firm hands upon the animal's halter, and backed him out of the stall. Kane added grudgingly, "'Tis Malone you'll be fighting this day and him the best in the outfit. Forget about gentlemanly rules and watch out for that bullet head of his."

"Thanks!" said Boone, and Sergeant Kane went on about his own duties.

It was after he'd groomed his horse that Boone saw a shadow fall across the open doorway. Looking up, he stood at attention, eyes straight to the front.

"Well, Boone, here we are again!" said Lieutenant Bremer, his eyes hot with hate. Boone said nothing. "And you are an enlisted man, a common soldier—and I am your superior officer. It's too bad you didn't stay away from me! And what do you suppose I'm going to do? Take it? Not on your life, Miles Boone! I'm going to make your life a living hell and drive you out of here to the tune of the Rogues March!"

BREMER'S dark features were flushed, his eyes smoldering. Boone still remained silent, which infuriated Bremer more. But he turned and stormed out the door.

As Miles Boone turned again to the saddle he was soaping, another step from the shadow came to his ears, and Sergeant Kane stopped before him.

"You heard nothing, Sergeant?" Boone spoke with the quiet authoritative tone of an officer.

"Not a word, sir!" Kane replied with the instinctive reaction of an old soldier to that tone. But as he departed a worried frown was creasing his forehead.

There was no drill that morning because of the snow, but the wood-cutting detail was marshaled at the Q.M. stables escorted by twenty infantry soldiers riding in the empty wagons. The long column passed through the gate, with Colonel Barrington standing by and anxiously watching.

The snow ceased and the wind blew clear and cold. The wagons formed into two parallel columns and rolled down the valley, men keeping a sharp lookout. They had gone about two miles from the fort when there came the shrill war whoops of the Sioux.

Feathered war bonnets topped the piney

ridge on the right. At least a hundred warriors came slantwise down the slope, seeking to head off the train, while another body broke out of the woods at the rear of the train and came on, lashing their ponies and yelling shrilly.

With practised ease, the two columns of wagons formed into a rectangular stronghold from which gun muzzles began to spout flame and lead at the racing warriors encircling them.

But Colonel Barrington had placed a picket on a high knoll, and the signal came back:

"Many Indians attacking wood train. Need help!"

There was quick response in the fort.

"Boots and saddles!" the cavalry trumpet sang exultantly.

Troopers of A Company hurried to stables, and fifty infantrymen from Company K lined up. Colonel Barrington, remembering the fort must be defended, permitted only half the cavalry—thirty troopers—to be detached for the job.

Captain Manson, being senior to Captain Beaumont, begged for the detail. After glancing at Manson's eager face, Colonel Barrington took care to write out his orders, then made doubly sure by repeating them verbally at the gate.

"You are to relieve the wood train. Under no circumstances will you pursue the Indians beyond Pine Trail Ridge!"

Captain Manson saluted the colonel, whose prudence he considered excessive, and rode out the gate with eighty men, exactly the number with which he had declared he "could ride through the whole Sioux nation."

The colonel, to soothe Captain Beaumont's wounded pride, put the cavalry captain in charge of the defenses of the fort, giving Lieutenant Bremer, an infantry officer, command of the cavalry.

Behind Lieutenant Bremer, riding in the rear of the cavalry column, was Sergeant Miles Boone, his chevrons newly sewed on his blue shirt.

Captain Manson took his column—not toward the wagon train as he had been ordered, but off at an angle away from it, as though to strike at the rear the bands of Sioux who were attacking.

Captain Manson wanted a real fight and no more sortie. The sight of Indians turning and fleeing was the only spark needed

to make him disregard those orders.

To Miles Boone, riding in rear of the cavalry, that Indian trick of turning and fleeing was an old story. It was also clear to him that Lieutenant Bremer was no cavalryman. The gait of the end of the mounted column showed no smoothness, but a ragged stretching out of the troopers and their mounts, succeeded by telescoping of rear elements, creating confusion.

The Indians fled over the first ridge, and appeared again climbing that further slope, Pine Trail Ridge.

THROWING all caution to the winds, and counting upon success to vindicate his course of action, Manson pressed on at the double quick into the valley beyond. Finding here that the slope was rocky, he turned to Lieutenant Bremer.

"Dismount your men and bring them forward on foot on the right of the line!" he shouted.

Bremer halted the half company of troopers and gave the command to, "Fight on foot."

Not receiving the proper orders, the men milled about uncertainly.

"Hurry!" yelled Bremer.

It was Miles Boone who gave the correct command to link up the riderless horses. Bremer heard, and saw the correction of his error and glared at Boone. Then without designating any one to take charge of the led horses he marched away.

Boone was the only non-commissioned officer with the horses. He moved out to the head of the column.

"Any orders for the led horses?" he called to Bremer.

"Yes, bring them on as soon as we reach the top of Pine Trail Ridge!" the lieutenant called back.

III

MILES BOONE had fought against both Indians and white men, and to him the Sioux strategy was appallingly clear. Placing his led horses under the shelter of a thick grove, he dismounted and moved forward on foot to the edge of the valley, studying its wooded recesses with a sharp eye. He watched Captain Manson's line of infantry soldiers, with Lieutenant Bremer's small force on their right rear,

swarming up Pine Trail Ridge.

Suddenly Boone drew in his breath sharply and stared down into the valley.

For the valley floor began to heave and move like a great ant hill. Feathered lance tips showed beneath every tree and from behind every bush. Pouring out from the rear of rocky buttes came veritable forests of lances. The whole armed force of the Sioux nation was coming out of that wooded valley, to attack the incautious Army forces now nearly at the top of the ridge opposite!

The old Indian trick of decoy and ambush had worked to perfection! Now was the moment for the slaughter of the hated soldiers!

Not only Sioux but Cheyennes and Arapahoes came flooding out in waves, converging on that hill, which became like a beleaguered island in a tumultuous sea.

Savage warriors rushed up that ridge, despite the slipperiness of the snow and ice. Clouds of arrows swept over the infantry. Men dropped, tearing at feathered shafts embedded in throat or chest or stomach. The fire from the old Springfield muzzle loaders was too slow. There was no time for men to ram in another round before the savages were among them with knives and tomahawks.

The cavalymen were luckier. Their carbines were breech-loading. Firing and dropping among the great boulders, they gave a good account of themselves.

Miles Boone hastily reviewed the situation. The valley through which he would have to lead his horses was filled with Indians. Nevertheless he figured that there was one slim chance. If he could somehow get around the head of that valley undetected, he might succeed in rescuing a few troopers before they were all massacred.

He moved his led horses out of that grove at a gallop, keeping well behind the near edge of the valley. He tore through scrub oak and pine, with the linked horses and troopers, fearful any moment that the Indians would break up his attempt at rescue.

At last he arrived at the far end of the valley. From here he could see the little band of troopers. Their numbers had diminished but they were resisting stubbornly, loading and firing, with the steepness of the slope aiding them.

When Boone's column thundered around the head of that valley, the little band had dwindled from twenty men to a mere half-dozen. Among these glided the silver bars of Lieutenant Bremer who was firing and reloading his revolver.

Boone saw no use in exposing all his men and horses to destruction. There were now only four men left on that hill-top, Bremer among them.

"First set of fours follow me—the rest of you back into cover!" shouted Boone and went on, followed by one trooper leading three horses.

As he came out into the open ground a yell went up from the massed Indians on the hill below. Arrows and bullets began to whip and thud around his little group. An arrow struck one of the led horses and it reared, screaming, upsetting the other three.

"Cut it loose!" called Boone, but seeing that the man had his hands more than full, Boone rode back himself, clasp knife in hand, and cut the link strap of the wounded animal.

By now there were only three men left—Lieutenant Bremer and two troopers. The Indians were creeping up on them, striving to take them alive for torture.

Scarce a hundred yards now separated Boone and the trooper riding behind him with the two led horses, when both of the men with Bremer dropped.

"Back!" Boone yelled to his lone trooper, who was glad enough to pull up and turn to the rear.

RIDING forward, Boone leaned down, crooking his arm for Bremer to reach, and the tall lieutenant flung himself up behind him on the cantle of the saddle, panting:

"It would have to be you, damn you!"

In another second Miles had whirled his horse about and was racing over the ridge, out of sight. Then, circling back, he galloped with the double burden through a renewed hail of missiles, joining the led horses at last. The Indians did not pursue, for the sound of the firing had reached the fort and Colonel Barrington had sent out another eighty men under Captain Beaumont, all that could be spared.

Once back with the horses, Lieutenant Bremer flung himself to the ground and

turned angrily on Boone.

"Sergeant Boone, why didn't you obey orders and bring the led horses across the valley as soon as we arrived, like you were told!"

"There was about half the Sioux tribe and most of the Cheyenne and Arapahoe nations in that valley," Boone replied.

"So you were afraid, Sergeant Boone?" taunted Bremer.

Boone flushed angrily but maintained a tight-lipped silence.

"Disobedience of orders and cowardice under fire!" Bremer snapped, the sharp edge of threat in his words. The troopers with the led horses stared, astonished and incredulous.

Bremer turned angrily, seizing the nearest horse, and mounted, forgetting in his blind hatred, to unfasten the link strap. The animal milled about helplessly as he tried to urge it forward, until a grinning cavalry trooper came to the infantry lieutenant's aid and unlinked the horse.

There was muttering among the troopers and many glowering looks at the lieutenant, who brought them back to the fort in the same helter-skelter fashion he had led them forth.

That diversion by a sortie from the fort, under Captain Beaumont, held the attention of the Indians, and the remainder of the small cavalry troop came in without further harm. Later Captain Beaumont returned with the bodies of many of the slain, including that of Captain Manson.

When Lieutenant Bremer left them, the troopers had plenty to say about him, and their unfriendliness to Miles Boone had changed to sympathy. Sergeant Kane's brusque voice put an end to the talk.

"You, Clancey and you, Martin, cease grooming and go get Mrs. Clancey and Mrs. Martin and your kids and take them to the powder magazine!" he ordered.

Men paused, curry combs in hand, and stared.

"And for what is that?" asked Clancey, wide-eyed.

"'Tis the colonel's orders. All women and children, including his own, to be put in the powder magazine—officers' and enlisted men's families. The colonel is going out with all available men to rescue the rest of the bodies of the men left behind, and he's taking no chances of the Injuns breaking in and harming the wom-

en and children in his absense!"

"You mane—" Clancey looked sick.

"Yes. A train of powder is being laid and orders issued to blow the women and children to Kingdom Come if the worst comes to the worst, rather than let them fall into the hands of the Injuns!"

Clancey and Martin put away their grooming kits and departed. There was no word spoken on the picket line for a few minutes until Miles Boone said something low-voiced to Sergeant Kane.

The first sergeant shook his head.

"No. Colonel's orders is that no man that has already been out fighting can join up to rescue the bodies. Meself, I think it's throwing good men away trying to rescue them that are already dead."

Boone shrugged and put away his own grooming kit. Everyone was ordered to the stockade walls pending the return of that detachment under Colonel Barrington. In the fading light, men's eyes strained for sight of that column. It came into view at last, carrying the bodies of the slain, and men relaxed and ate their suppers between shifts of guard duty on the walls.

THERE was no retreat formation, simply the firing of sunset gun and the lowering of the flag to the beautiful strains of bugles blowing, *To the Colors*.

The call had special significance to Boone. He remembered his engagement to fight Malone down in the quartermaster shed and, as the last note of the bugles died away, he strode down there, an unlighted cigar in his mouth.

Malone was there ahead of time, awaiting him. But there were not many troopers to enjoy the fight, what with the dead and the number on guard.

"I've heard of the fine thing you did this day," said Malone, "and the dirty thanks you got for it, which has nothing to do with our little arrangement. But I wish you to know, before we start, that I have not the hard feelings now that I had for you this morning, and it's a gay bit of a fight we'll have in any case!"

"Fairly spoken." Boone nodded and placed his unlighted cigar on a projecting beam and stripped off blouse and shirt. The wind had veered and a freezing chill was coming into the air. He said, "We had best finish this quickly or we'll freeze."

"It may be that I can keep you warm," promised Malone, without rancor.

He came forward, feinting with his left, his right arm darting forward like a battering ram. Boone shifted and took the blow glancing off his left arm and drove in at Malone's stomach. Malone gasped and shook his head, then suddenly threw a savage punch which rocked Boone on his feet and in some measure stimulated him, for he sidestepped another powerful swing and struck Malone, right and left hand, in the stomach again.

Malone seemed helpless and dropped his arms, breathing hard. But Boone saw the eyes of his antagonist and fainted and leaped back as Malone suddenly came to life and struck out with all he had, in smashing rights and lefts.

They missed and Malone went off-balance. Boone stepped in then and drove hard to the point of the chin. Malone sighed and rocked on his feet a second, then collapsed slowly and clumsily, falling prone into the dirt.

One of the troopers ran forward and stared down.

"He's out like a light!" he stammered unbelievably.

IV

HURRIEDLY water was brought and the face of the unconscious man was bathed.

"He'll die of pneumonia!" warned Boone, and would have reached down with his shirt in hand to wipe the water off, but Malone struggled up to his knees, lashing out blindly, eyes closed.

"Quit it, Malone!" said a trooper. "You've been licked in a fair fight and knocked out!"

Malone opened his eyes, stared about, and slowly climbed to his feet.

"Did you knock me out?" he asked Boone.

Boone nodded. Malone shook his head, like a man striving to shake water from his ears after coming out of the surf.

"Well, well!" he said. "And me the champion of the Second Dragoons! You're a good man, else you'd never have done it. I bear no grudge." He shoved out his hand. "'Tis friends we are from this day!"

"From this day," Boone said, shook hands, and helped Malone on with his

shirt and blouse. "It might be," he hazarded, "that I have a drink of snake bite specific hidden away in my locker that would do us both good after our little war dance." He retrieved his unlighted cigar from the beam.

"I can use some of it, for it's grown bitter cold of a sudden!" agreed Malone. Men bent into the wind, which had risen in velocity and lowered in temperature, until their breath was blown away like white mist.

They came into the barracks and sat solemnly on Boone's bunk as he pulled out his field boots from his locker and drew forth a bottle from the inner depths of one of them. But the entry of Sergeant Kane stopped them after the second swig.

"Let no man take off his clothes this night," said Kane. "The temperature is dropping to thirty below and sentries will be relieved every half-hour instead of two hours. They cannot stand the perishing cold. And the blizzard is rising full blast, with snow forming ramps against the stockade, which must be shoveled away lest the Indians walk right up and into the fort without the trouble of scaling the walls. God help us all if Red Cloud sees fit to attack this night! The colonel is sending for reinforcements and wants a messenger to start out tonight for Fort Laramie. Any volunteers?"

The silence that fell on that barracks room could be cut with a knife. Men listened to the howling of the blizzard, and those farthest from the big stove felt the cold probing their backs with icy fingers.

There was also silence at that moment, in the adjutant's office at headquarters, across the parade ground. Lieutenant Summers, the adjutant, stared at Lieutenant Bremer speechless, and from Bremer's set face to the paper he'd just handed across the desk.

"Bremer, I'm amazed! Boone saved your life at risk of his own. He should be recommended for a Medal of Honor, and here you prefer a set of court martial charges against him for disobedience of orders and cowardice in battle."

"He wouldn't have had to rescue me if he'd obeyed orders. I told him to bring up the led horses when I reached the top of the ridge. His failure to obey me led to all those heroics. But the heroics don't disguise the fact that he was remiss in

performing his duty!" Bremer's face was set and stubborn.

Summers looked at him curiously. "You hate this man, don't you, Bremer? I've heard rumors that you and Boone tangled when you were both officers—something about a duel."

"Personalities have nothing to do with it. A soldier obeys orders in battle, or he doesn't. If he were my own brother, I'd prefer charges against him!" Bremer's face was white with anger.

"I've no doubt you would!" Summers stared at him coldly. "Well, it's your privilege to prefer charges, but in my opinion you're a vindictive fool to take advantage of your privilege after what happened."

"I'm not asking for your opinion, Summers," said Bremer, turned on his heel and departed, a blast of icy air blowing in as he opened the outer door and left Headquarters.

SUMMERS sat and stared at the formal set of charges, written out meticulously in legal verbiage, citing the Articles of War and giving the specifications.

The outer door opened, again admitting an icy blast of air. It closed, and Summers looked up. Sergeant Boone was standing there, clad in a heavy buffalo coat, wearing a fur cap with ear muffs.

"Sergeant Boone, A Company, requesting permission to speak to the Commanding Officer." He stood erect and soldierly, eyes to the front.

"What is the purpose of your request, Sergeant?" asked Summers.

"Word came that the Commanding Officer needs a volunteer to ride to Fort Laramie."

Summers sat bolt upright. "You are volunteering?" In the silence the icy wind howled outside, as though trying to tear the roof from the building.

"Yes, sir."

"Well, by the eternal!" Summers looked at the papers on the desk before him and from them back to Miles Boone. "That's mighty fine!—Orderly!"

The soldier on duty came at the double.

"Hurry to Colonel Barrington's quarters, give him the adjutant's respects and tell him that a volunteer is waiting to start to Fort Laramie!" The man glanced wide-eyed at Boone, then hurried away. "That's

splendid, Boone, for several reasons." Summers glanced at Bremer's written accusations again.

Colonel Barrington gave Boone his own horse, a thoroughbred. The colonel and the men on guard at the gate knew that the odds against him were so great as to make success well nigh impossible. No one believed that any man, however strong, and however well-mounted, could possibly survive in that blizzard, even if he could get through the Indians who surrounded the fort. It was the most forlorn kind of a forlorn hope, but the attempt must be made, if only for the sake of the women and children in the place.

The sentry came up to present arms to Boone as he rode through the gate.

"May God help you!" Colonel Barrington called after him, the words nearly lost in the swirling wind and snow into which horse and man disappeared. . . .

After the third day the blizzard died down. The garrison of the fort, exhausted by day and night watch, and the hard labor of clearing the snow from before the stockade, was called to arms at daybreak. Savage yells and the crack of rifles echoed across the snow, its white expanse swarming with dark forms of many Indians. The taste of blood from the massacre of Captain Manson's force had only whetted the appetites of the red men.

Red Cloud was there with nearly two thousand Sioux, Cheyennes and Arapahoes. The great war bonnets of scores of lesser chieftains were swaying in magnificent pageantry as they led their followers in a gradually tightening circle about the fort.

Colonel Barrington reflected somberly, if by some miracle Boone could have made it to Laramie, it would still be three days more before reinforcements could reach us—and we can barely last the three days!"

He wondered how his little band of soldiers, steadily lessening under the hail of rifle fire and clouds of arrows, could possibly hold back a simultaneous mass attack against all four walls of the fort.

Again he placed the women and children in the magazine and stationed one of the wounded soldiers, on a cot, with matches ready in case the screaming wave of Indians flowed over the stockade and into the fort. Weary men stood at the

loopholes, firing their old-fashioned muzzle-loaders intermittently, striving to make every shot of the fast dwindling ammunition count.

Over two hundred miles away, at Fort Laramie, a miracle had happened. An orderly called the Commanding Officer to the door of "Bedlam," the bachelor officers' building where they were giving a Christmas Eve dance. Officers and their ladies saw on the parade ground a tall man clad in a snow-covered buffalo robe, swaying beside a dead horse.

"Courier from Colonel Barrington with important despatches!" was the man's report.

THERE was swift response from the commanding officer, but Boone shook his head.

"Colonel, marching a battalion there on foot will take too long. What they need most are breech-loading repeating rifles!"

"We've just received a shipment of the new breechloading Springfields," said the colonel thoughtfully.

Boone, rocking with weariness, sipped the hot whiskey and lemon they had given him. "If you'll give me one hundred and fifty of those, with ammunition and a few men, I'll try to get through while the battalion follows, sir," he suggested.

So within two hours of his arrival, a train of wagons set forth from Laramie, with Sergeant Boone asleep on the seat of the leading wagon, and with some thirty men—teamsters, quartermaster employes and a handful of soldiers—to face the long trek back to the besieged fort.

The siege of the fort had tightened from day to day. It was now the morning of the seventh day since Boone had departed. Even Colonel Barrington, who had tried to maintain a cheerful bearing before his men, could no longer keep his anxiety from being apparent.

For on this morning, the Indians were preparing to do what he had dreaded. Instead of massing their attacks at one section of the stockade, this morning they had split up into four bodies, one opposite each wall of the rectangular fort.

The colonel stared around the catwalks below the loop-holes of the log stockade, and groaned at the sight of the pitiful handful of his men on each wall. Even with cooks, guards, hospital orderlies and

Q.M. civilians pressed into service and with every officer, including himself, armed with the few sporting repeating rifles on the place, the result of a simultaneous attack would be disastrous for the garrison.

The Indians made their preparations in silence, sinister in its presage of finality and doom. Officers and men took a last farewell of their women and children and hurried to the stockade walls. Rifles were loaded and extra rifles, those of the dead and wounded, were set by each man. When those old muzzle-loaders were emptied, the colonel well knew that there would be no time to reload.

A screaming crescendo of war whoops burst from the savages, echoing back from the woods.

"They're coming!" shouted a soldier.

The colonel sighed and started for his post at the gate. Then surprisingly, the yelling was dying down. He raised his head, sharply, wondering what this portended.

There came to him then the sound of firing, far off, borne by the breeze—the heavy roar and rattle of rifle-fire!

"Some of the Injuns is pulling out!" yelled a soldier from the stockade, and a weak cheer went up from the men around that small fort.

Had they known on what slender foundations their new found hopes rested, there would have been no cheering.

Miles Boone had hurried his weary men and mules like a slave driver, the animals straining to pull through the great drifts that so often blocked the road. Men out with shovels broke the way, and the mules were put at a gallop to make up the lost time when they came to windswept open spaces.

On the morning of the fourth day out from Laramie they were within two miles of the little fort when a wandering party of Sioux, on the way for the final attack against the garrison, spotted the column of wagons and raced away for reinforcements.

Miles Boone wasted no time. He was galloping his column to gain shelter in the fort when from a knoll he caught a glimpse of the great war parties gathered around the stockade.

Immediately he obliqued the wagons into an oval around a small draw which

would shelter the animals, and drove the men to furious activity, boring loop-holes in the wagon boxes, and laying out rifles and ammunition. Grain sacks and earth were piled up, and boxes that had held the rifles were filled with dirt and stacked.

MEN were given four loaded rifles apiece—mule-skinner, civilians and a few soldiers, the best shots only—while those not so good were detailed to the job of reloading. No one, Miles Boone ordered, must open fire until he gave the word.

It was in his mind that a strong force of Indians would race back, hoping to beat their comrades in getting the rich loot of a wagon train. And in this he was right.

Indians began quickly to mass on the hills around them. Miles swore in astonishment as he estimated that there must be at least fifteen hundred of them, with more streaming in every minute.

Up on a knoll he saw Red Cloud flaunting a blanket like a banner, as a signal to attack. Some five hundred Sioux and Cheyennes moved out, breaking from a walk to a trot, and from a trot to a gallop.

"Here they come!" Miles Boone's voice was calm. "Kill a man with each shot. Remember that every miss is another chance at your scalp!"

V

THE wave of screaming horsemen was scarce fifty yards from the small silent corral when the white men cut loose and a storm of lead smashed into the charging mass of yelling warriors. Men fired and snatched up the reserve rifles and fired again.

It was impossible to miss at that short range. Under that terrific hail the remnants of the charging Indians swerved around the small fortress, hanging low beneath their ponies' necks and shooting, ready to close in the second the fire of the white men began to decrease.

"They're waiting for the fire to die down!" Miles Boone walked along the line of kneeling and prone men and spoke to the loaders behind them. "Don't waste a bullet!"

The flagging loaders grunted and with lips drawn back, wolflike, redoubled their speed in handling the now heated rifles.

The Indians waited in vain for the fire to cease, for the loaders were working with the swiftness of men who know that life depends upon their efforts. They speeded up the slipping of cartridges into the breeches of the extra rifles and handed them to the men firing, with many a curse as overheated barrels scorched unwary hands.

Every Colt six-shooter, and the few repeating rifles of the civilian teamsters, increased the volume of lead spurting death at the enemy.

Miles Boone picked up a repeating rifle dropped by a wounded teamster, worked the bolt, and fired like an automaton, between every few shots glancing around the interior of the corral.

The fire was keeping up with an intensity that, he figured, the Indians had never encountered before, and he took courage from that.

Warriors toppled from their ponies, and ponies crashed to the earth not ten paces from the corral. Once Miles saw a single .50-caliber shot plough its way through three Indians in line so that they dropped almost simultaneously.

"They sure are getting it plenty!" a soldier near him growled.

Then Boone's heart gave a lift. The volume of fire was getting too much for the first wave of Indians. Breaking in confusion, they began to disperse, leaving the ground before the corral littered with dead and wounded warriors. Mortally hit horses were threshing out their lives close to the wagon boxes.

A wounded Indian, not twenty paces away, began to fire from over the back of a dead pony. Miles Boone picked him off carefully, only to swing his sights on a second and a third Indian and drop each with single shots.

In a momentary lull he rose and took stock of his force, grimly facing the fact that his own men were sustaining losses as well. Two of the teamsters were dead. Three soldiers were wounded, one of them mortally, and two civilians were down, one with a bullet through the lungs and coughing blood.

With the survivors there was not the slightest idea of giving up. Boone saw some of the men prepare strings, looping them around their rifle triggers and kicking off their boots to enable them to fire

a last shot that would save them from torture. Those with revolvers spun the cylinders to assure that the final shot would be ready for the same purpose. He looked at his revolver and assured himself of his own last shot.

A second and greater mounted charge was mustering in the timber, as he could see. Disturbed leaves and swaying bushes showed him where dismounted Indians were wriggling forward under cover, dragging rifles and bows and arrows.

Flashes of light puzzled him a moment until he figured that the Indians used pocket mirrors to flash signals to the hills where the mounted warriors were massed. Then he heard the barbaric notes of the death chant rise from the massed horsemen.

"Here they come again!" he shouted.

This time, half-naked warriors leaped out from behind the low brush, driving forward, whooping and yelling in a wedge-shaped attack, their rifles barking in a roar of sound. Their aim was high, however, and the men behind the wagons were crouched low. They listened to the splinter of the bullets above them and held their fire until their sights showed a good target.

THE mounted Indians, waiting on the hills, were certain now that the weakening of the white man's fire had at last come. Like a great wave, a tumultuous crescent of horsemen, brilliant in gay-colored warbonnets, stripped bronze bodies and the gaudy, painted shields of buffalo hide, rolled down the hills in a great wave, to overwhelm the white men.

Now the nearly silent corral erupted suddenly into new life. A hail of lead knifed along the massed Indian ranks like a great scythe, tumbling men from horses and striking down Indian ponies until the charge recoiled. But only to reform and come on again. Six times they charged, and six times they were repulsed.

They'll get us this time if they come once more, reflected Boone, for they had been holding off the Indians for two hours, and his men were spent and weary.

Then peering at the Indians from between two wagons, he rose slowly to his feet.

"Boys, I believe they've had enough!" he called out.

And murmurs from the men around him became incredulous and joyful swearing in amazed disbelief. For the one sign of Indian defeat was too evident to be missed—the furtive slipping up of Indians, dragging away their dead, a point of honor with Indians. Nor did the white men fire at them, joyous because the thing had ended and that their scalps were still on their own heads.

Then, watching, Miles Boone leaned forward, his joy at the escape beginning to dissipate and shred away into new worry. For the Indians had suddenly left their task and were rejoining their mounted forces. The nearest Indians began to turn back and reassemble, all of them gazing in the direction of the fort.

Following their glances, Boone suddenly felt a chill grip his heart.

For there, rounding the turn that led into this small valley, marching in plain view, and making not the slightest attempt to seek cover or keep out of the Indians' sight, came a marching column, a pitifully small column of no more than sixty infantrymen, armed with muzzle-loading Springfields. Behind them, drawn by two horses, was the small howitzer belonging to the fort.

Riding at their head was Lieutenant Bremer.

"Now, what's up, in the name of the Almighty?" Miles Boone groaned as he stared at the doomed column.

It appeared certain to him that Bremer had no idea of the strength and nearness of the Indians. The one faint ray of hope was that all the savages had not yet been aware of the approach of the helpless column, the different groups—Sioux, Arapahoe and Cheyennes—being separated, and with most of them withdrawing from the fight. They already had gone some distance.

But the Indians nearby knew. They began to mass on the hill above Bremer's column.

If only the fool would hurry and get into the shelter of the corral, breathed Miles Boone.

The Indians were now plainly massing for a charge, some four hundred of them. There was still time for Bremer to reach the corral, if he didn't halt.

But Bremer did just that. Sighting the warbonnets and lances of the assembling

warriors on the hill crest above him, he shouted a command. His men swung into line, sixty men with single shot muzzle-loaders against four hundred or more warriors!

Boone thought despairingly, If the fool would only use his howitzer he'd still have half a chance!

But the howitzer, with its team and driver and cannoneers stood where it was without any attempt being made to unlimber and get ready for action. Bremer evidently knew even less about artillery than he did about cavalry!

The Indians, incredulous that any one would so recklessly violate every principle of commonsense, halted, uncertain, and suspecting a trap.

AND Bremer continued to commit the greatest military fault—he did nothing. The cannoneers and driver of the small howitzer received no orders to prepare for action. It came over Boone that the first rush of the mounted Indians would swoop over that precious piece of artillery, cut down the cannoneers and driver before they could bet unlimbered, loaded, and into action.

His chances of saving Bremer and his men would be frustrated by Bremer's stubbornness. There was one slim chance—that howitzer!

It was in that moment or two of lull before the Indian storm would break that Miles Boone suddenly exploded into action.

"Haul this wagon back!" he called to the men nearest him and raced to the draw that sheltered the animals.

He was instantly in the saddle and out of the corral, galloping toward Bremer and his line of waiting men.

A stir and movement began among the Indians on the hill above. They were making ready to attack, in spite of their suspicions of a trap. The wailing notes of the death chant, the prelude to a charge, echoes among the trees.

Boone drew up before Bremer.

"If you'll double-time your men into the corral, Lieutenant, I can cover them with my rifle fire," he said.

"Oh, here's our brave sergeant with his wagons," Bremer sneered. "Didn't they teach you, wagon soldier, to dismount before addressing a superior officer?"

Bremer was heavily sarcastic.

"You fool!" Boone's voice was tense with anger. "You've got four or five hundred warriors ready to jump you any moment! Get your men into the corral before you lose every man jack of them!"

He swung his horse away and rode around the line of riflemen to that howitzer and its crew.

"Follow me—gallop!" he commanded, and the driver plied whip. "Into the corral and commence firing—shortened fuses!"

He pointed to the group of wagons. The artillerymen, glad to receive orders at last, plied whip. The recruit infantrymen heard his words and heard the clanking rattle of the howitzer being galloped to the corral. At the same time they sighted the full force of that Indian mass above them beginning slowly to flow down the rock-strewn hill. A few infantry recruits at the left of the line started it, more and more followed, and in a moment the entire line had shredded away and was streaking it in a wild race for the corral.

Yells went up from the Indian warriors as they saw their prey escaping. Lieutenant Bremer alone stood still, his horse fighting to follow Boone's.

"Your men have more sense than you!" called Boone. "Follow them!"

Leaning low on his horse's neck, he rode for the corral as a storm of arrows began to whizz and whisper through the air. Casting a quick glance behind him, he saw Bremer rocking in the saddle as his maddened horse broke and followed.

Boone turned and swung in beside Bremer. Seeing a feathered shaft deep in Bremer's chest, Boone reached across and held the officer in saddle, sweeping along with him into the corral just as the Indian charge burst down the valley, and hundreds of warriors swept after them.

Without any need for command, those riflemen in the corral spewed forth a storm of leaden death. The cannoneers stood back from the gun and the lanyard was drawn taut. A shell screamed up and over and blew into death-dealing fragments above the wildly charging Indians.

Miles Boone, easing the half-fainting Bremer off his horse and onto the ground, ran to the howitzer. He directed the cannoneers onto that second target—the main body of the Indians, now returning, which

was sweeping down in a vast charge against the corral.

Howitzer shells, in rapid succession, burst over them. The heart went out of that charge. The mysterious death which struck from the air chilled the Indian ardor. There was a sudden check and halt and milling about, then a wild galloping away from that ill-omened place of death.

* * * * *

YOU'VE broken the back of Red Cloud's forces, Boone, and for that, and for other things I'm recommending a Congressional Medal of Honor for you, and a commission as lieutenant!"

Colonel Barrington was there with a small force from the fort and with Lieutenant Summers and Captain Beaumont.

Summers said something low voiced to the colonel.

"We'll see about that!" said the Old Man and strode over to where the surgeon was working over Lieutenant Bremer.

The surgeon shook his head as he wiped his scalpel. Bremer's eyes fluttered open in a face drained of all color, and with the sweat of death already upon it.

But the colonel had a wrong to right, death or no death.

"Bremer," he said gently, "Sergeant Kane has reported to me a statement you made to Sergeant Boone in the saddle room, which has some bearing on these charges you preferred against Boone."

"Tear up the charges, Colonel. I can't win—Guess I'm kicking off, Miles." Bremer looked up at Boone. "You won the girl. You won the duel and pinked me beautifully. I was a skunk to lie about it. You won the war against Red Cloud. Tell Nancy I think she was a wise girl to turn me down to marry a wagon soldier." He coughed, a froth of blood appeared on his lips. "Forgive me, Miles. I've been a jealous hound!"

Boone was kneeling beside him, holding Bremer's hand, when Bremer gave a last gasping breath and grew still.

The men were cleaning up the corral. They loaded dead and wounded into the wagons. The Indians slipped back, surreptitiously carrying away their dead on the backs of ponies. They had no wagons.

"I learned this day, Boone," said Colonel Barrington, "that the thing that will lead to the final defeat of the Indian on this continent is the fact that they have no wagon soldiers!"



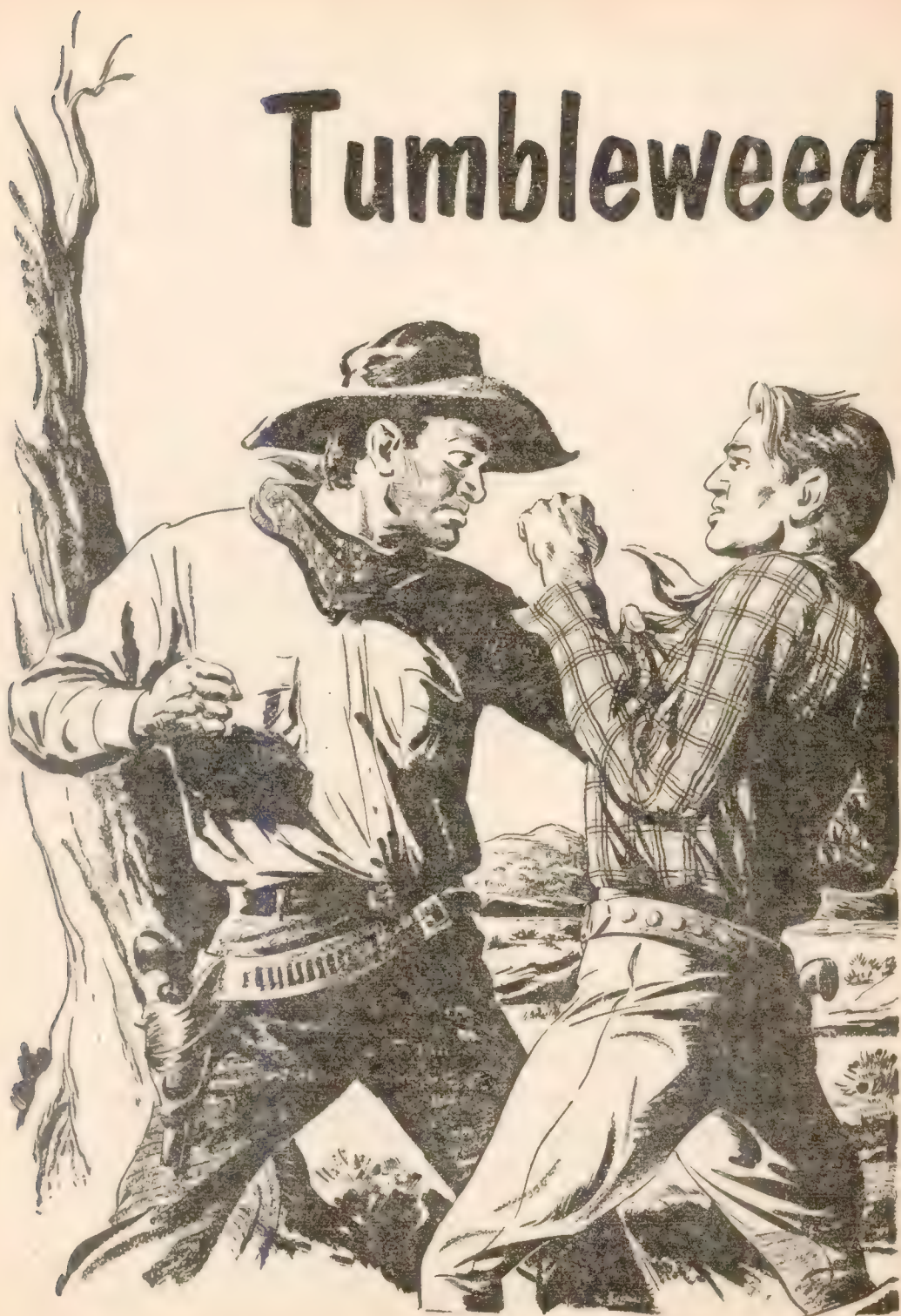
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*McKinnon was a wandering
waddy, with no wire fencing him
in—until he saw a
pretty cowgal get slapped around*



I

LIGHT was bright in Jay McKinnon's eyes and the sun was warm against his back. Timber on the slopes rimming the valley was distant velvet, and the rich grass on the valley floor was a lake of emerald. The birds in the brush sang beautiful music and the soft wind stirring the aspen leaves brought sweet scent to his nostrils.

He was a happy man, because he knew no boss. Happy because time was his own and it made no difference to him whose fences were strung across his way. All of the country belonged to him, for the simple reason that he was looking at it. He was happy because he owned nothing and everything at the same time.

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He had pulled up on the rim of a little park in the brush and timber, a small island of grass slanting gently away from him. He had approached it silently because he was riding slowly, and a slow-moving man makes little noise. He sat with one long leg hooked by the knee over the horn of his saddle, a kindly light in his eyes, a grin on his lips, watching the two leaning side by side against a small boulder in the center of the park. A man and a girl.

A man in store-bought whipcord saddle pants, expensive boots, a plaid cotton shirt with a broad tie looped through its collar. A fawn stetson lay on the grass beside him. A tolerably young man and a tolerably big one. A stockman, without any of the marks of a stockman's labors about him, as far as Jay McKinnon could see.

The girl was another kind, and it was she who held McKinnon's attention. She belonged in these hills and in this valley. She belonged on the rich grass in the noonday sun.

Her shirt was faded and too large for her, its seams sagging below the crowns of her small, squared shoulders. She wore levis and a pair of boots which were scuffed and cracked and shapeless with comfort. Her hat was a battered flat-crown which hung by a leather lanyard down her back so that the sun could look at her hair. Her hair was beautiful, brownish, like the raw spring earth after a rain. Her face was beautiful, also. It had a clean look, and to Jay McKinnon, only clean things could be beautiful.

WHEN McKinnon halted the man had been kissing the girl. He had been kissing her thoroughly, in the way a beautiful girl should be kissed. McKinnon approved. He was a perfectionist, and along with the sun and the clear, cloudless sky and the noonday quiet, this had seemed perfection. Now it was different. They were talking and the tone of voices carried up the slope to him.

The girl didn't sound like a girl who had just been kissed. She sounded angry—maybe hurt. She moved away from the man. He put out his hand and dragged her back, kind of roughly, McKinnon thought. There seemed to be an argu-

ment, but with too much bite in it to be a lovers' quarrel.

McKinnon frowned, thinking that perfection was like this—short-lived and impermanent as hell. It made him a little sad, and grateful again that all ranges were his and all girls, and that when perfection escaped him, he could go hunting it again.

He was about to jog his pony into motion when the man and the girl below suddenly stood up. The girl tilted her head back and said something defiant. The man snapped a short answer and when the girl turned her back on him he spun her about, fastened a fist on the front of her shirt, and struck her lightly across the face—lightly, but with malice.

McKinnon's long frame uncoiled and he hit the ground. He crossed the grass at a reaching, ungainly stride which was surprisingly sure and swift. He knew that a man built trouble this way, but the day was too warm and the sky too clear for that kind of thing.

He reached the two of them before they saw him, a tall shadow against the sun, reaching out to touch the man's shoulder with a grip which had no gentleness in it.

"Reckon you've made a mistake, mister. Reckon it'd make the little lady happy to hear you say so. Maybe you better tell her—"

The girl stared at him with rounded eyes and rounded mouth, but the man, bigger than he had seemed from a distance and solid as hell, wasn't surprised. He was one hundred per cent angry—at the girl and also at Jay.

He flung off McKinnon's arresting hand, squared a little, and swung his fist. It was a sure swing and too fast to be ducked. It hit McKinnon on the mouth and knocked him sprawling on the grass. The man leaped in savagely, one boot upraised.

McKinnon rolled on the grass clumsily, because of his big body. He got his legs under him and he came up. He caught the front of the man's shirt as the man had caught the girl's. But it wasn't a slap he delivered. It was a solid punch, followed by three others so swift in succession that their impacts seemed to make one sound.

He released his grip on the man's

shirt then and the man sagged silently and limply to the ground. McKinnon turned to the girl. She was looking at him with a kind of unconvinced awe. It was the kind of a look that might turn into anything. McKinnon felt a little uneasy about it.

"Ma'am, I sure am sorry for the fuss," he said. "Pretty up here. Kind of pity it couldn't stay so."

"You were listening!" the girl said shakily.

McKinnon couldn't tell whether it was a question or an accusation. He saw she was frightened. He thought maybe she had been frightened even when she was being kissed. That was a hell of a note. He shook his head.

"No, ma'am. Just looking. No offense meant."

The girl shook her head kind of dazedly. She looked down at the man sprawled messily at McKinnon's feet. She touched her lips with a small tongue. She looked back at McKinnon.

"You're not going to believe this," she said unsteadily. "I'm not even sure I do, and in this country they say Maggie Desmond is sure of everything. Just the same, I think you've done me a favor. I wish you could stay around long enough for me to find out for sure. If I owe you, I'd like to see you paid."

McKINNON blinked at this. He was an ungainly man and in his own opinion an ugly one, and it was his observation that when a young and beautiful woman spoke kindly to him, she didn't mean it. However, he liked looking at beautiful country, and he liked looking at beautiful women.

"I'm in no hurry to speak of, ma'am," he said.

"You'd better be!" the girl told him intensely. "It looks to me like you've broken King Allen's nose. If he can find you when he opens his eyes, he'll kill you for that!"

McKinnon looked at the man at his feet. He had bent the man's face somewhat. Frowning thoughtfully, he noted the bulge of a shoulder-holstered gun under Allen's plaid shirt. He shook his head.

"About the best he could do is try," he told the girl. "What was this favor you think I did you? I don't mind obliging

when the chance comes along, but I sort of like to know it when I am giving somebody a hand."

"I think you saved my life, and I know you saved my ranch. I was about to agree to marry King Allen when you rode up. I was down to my last chips. I won't weaken that much again, regardless of what happens. Maybe it's just that you saved me from myself. Now I'm trying to save you. Hit your saddle and get as far out of this valley as you can in the next hour. Get as far from this county as you can in the next week. And don't stop riding for the next month. King Allen can afford expensive grudges. He'll have you hunted down if he can find your trail."

"Never like to put anybody to a bother, Miss Desmond," McKinnon said. "No call for a man to spend money hiring me hunted. Supposing I sort of wait right here till this bucko gets around to telling me what's on his mind. Be a sight easier on everybody but maybe him. I don't like traveling fast and far."

The girl looked at him for a moment, then shrugged. "All right. You've impressed me, if that's what you want. I've given you fair warning. Do what you like. But if you land in real trouble, don't expect help. Folks in this part of the country have enough trouble of their own."

She wheeled away and crossed the park to the timber. She reappeared in a moment, riding the horse she had apparently left there. McKinnon watched her go. She rode like someone had invented the saddle for her. She didn't look back.

McKinnon shrugged. This was a curious affair. And since he was in no hurry, he could afford curiosity. Bending, he removed the fallen man's gun from its concealed holster, emptied it of brass, and replaced it, buttoning the shirt over it once more. This done, he withdrew a little distance and sat down.

With a philosopher's patience he brought out makings and rolled a careful cigarette. King Allen was already stirring a little. Jay didn't think the man would be out much longer. And since the girl had not told him enough to make him understand what he had seen happening in this little park, he figured the unconscious man on the grass would have to oblige. They could between them, at least, right

soon settle the question of who was going to kill whom.

McKinnon was very interested in King Allen's recovery. If a man would sit tight and watch another waken from either a natural sleep or an induced one, he could learn much about that man. His reflexes and their speed, for instance. A fair idea of just how dangerous a man might be.

Allen stirred vaguely a couple of times, then lay completely motionless again. McKinnon knew the man was now fully conscious and studying him through barely parted lashes. He continued to puff patiently and with relish upon his cigarette.

AFTER maybe a couple of minutes, Allen sat slowly up, shaking his head as though it was not already clear. He pawed with apparent clumsiness at his neck as though there was stiffness in it, but he unobtrusively managed at the same time to unfasten the top three buttons of his shirt over his gun. Only then did he turn his eyes full on McKinnon and stop blinking.

"Where's your partner?" he asked.

McKinnon's brows raised. "Partner?"

"Sure, sure!" King Allen said impatiently. "The boy that belted me on the head from behind when you grabbed me."

McKinnon studied the man's face. "Damage seems to be all in front," he said.

"Maggie talk before she pulled out?" Allen asked sharply.

Jay considered this, finally nodding. "Some," he admitted, "if the little lady's name was Maggie."

"You got a funny idea of what makes a lady!" Allen snapped. He heaved himself to his feet. "I don't like buckos who listen in on private conversations. You and me have got to have one of our own. Supposing we drift back to the Crown."

"Your spread?" McKinnon asked. "If a meal goes with the ride, all right. I'm poor on talk when my belly's empty."

King Allen's battered face was obviously paining him considerably and his eyes were sullen with an anger he was having difficulty hiding, but he managed what might have passed for a neutral grin. He swung easily in beside McKinnon and clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"Sure," he said. "Maybe this will work out, no hard feelings. We'll see. The Crown has always got a place for a man

with handy fists. Fetch your horse."

II

IT WAS pretty syrupy. McKinnon was amused. It was a deceptive thing to others when a man looked more placid and stupid than he actually was.

Smiling inwardly, Jay turned away toward the place where he had left his pony. He had taken only three steps across the grass before a stutter of metallic clickings sounded behind him. He turned unhurriedly. King Allen was savagely snapping the hammer of his small, double-action gun, astonishment and anger at its failure to fire on his battered face. It's muzzle was pointed at McKinnon's belly.

Jay reached down and unbuckled his own belt. He let it fall to the ground.

"Mister," he said quietly, "you're just too damned ornery to clutter up a piece of country as pretty as this. Me, I don't like being shot in the back—with a live gun or a dead one!"

King Allen tossed his useless weapon down, brightness coming up in his eyes. McKinnon fully understood. This was a powerful man and a ruthless one. He had hard hands and a big body—and he liked the work and he liked the work he could do with them against other men. Jay knew this wouldn't be like the first time he had faced Allen. The owner of the Crown was on guard now, and he had some measure of his adversary.

It was a man's own business if he wanted to drift, checked by no fence and few of the other barriers which held most men, just as it was another's business if he wanted to kiss a pretty girl in the mid-day sun. But a drifter owed one obligation to the country through which he passed. He was bound to heel a snake when he saw one, and besides there was nothing like a good tangle to give a man an appetite.

Allen came against McKinnon with a rush, head low. No one could stand against such a charge. Jay gripped Allen's shoulders, clamping him close to his own body, and drew his knees up as they went down together. With his bent knees, he flung Allen clear.

The man landed hard, but seemed unshaken. He was on his feet before McKinnon and back in, feet first. Jay felt

the hard bite of boot heels and caught the man's leg, swinging his own full weight against it in a rolling motion which felled Allen again.

Sod was in McKinnon's face. Presently the taste of blood, the smell of sweat, the heat and hard breathing of savage exertion. King Allen fought as soundlessly as McKinnon himself, and with a fury Jay had never before encountered. There was an animal ferocity in the man, as though his whole nature craved victory through any means. He used teeth, nails, elbows, and knees. His fingers probed and dug.

McKinnon had begun this because a man had slapped a girl, and all life he had been unable to sidestep trouble, wherever he encountered it. Maybe he had begun it, too, because he was an ugly man and King Allen was arrogantly handsome. Whatever the beginning, he realized soon afterward that he was fighting for his life with a man who wanted to take it for no better reason than a hunger for the domination of others.

The fight was grim and painful enough to blot out the beauty of the day and the valley, leaving a hard and brittle anger which was no less terrible for its quiet. Old lessons, almost forgotten, returned, old deviltries and old tricks. King Allen cried out brokenly twice, and presently lay still.

With a grinding effort Jay McKinnon rose to his feet, swaying there unsteadily for a long moment, unable to regain his wind. Then, limping, he moved to the timber where Maggie Desmond had found her horse and brought back King Allen's animal, also waiting there.

SWINGING the limp body of the man clumsily across his saddle, McKinnon led the burdened animal slowly up the slope to where he had left his own mount. His horse danced shy of the smell of blood about him and about King Allen. He had trouble catching his stirrup and getting into his seat. Once settled there, he turned back down the slope, leading Allen's horse with Allen's body dangling loosely, head and heels down, across the leather where he had dumped it.

At the foot of the slope he found a track winding eastward down the valley. He turned onto this. Somewhere ahead there

would be a town. All valleys as rich as this one had their own centers. And in this town would be a man or men to whom he could deliver King Allen.

In this town also would be those who could tell him what kind of a blight lay across the pleasantness of their valley that women came close to marrying men they did not love, that a kiss in the sun meant a threat to a girl's life and the loss of her ranch, and that the pleasant mood of a stranger was goaded to a fury of self-defense when he wanted no more than a meal or two and a friendly drink, passing through from one horizon to another.

McKinnon rode across a bridge spanning a small creek and pulled up to peer painfully through swollen eyes at a small, neat sign advertising the township limits of Allentown—Population 600.

He was aware of the significance of the name of the man draped across the saddle of the horse behind him in the name of this town. But his personal anger at King Allen was not yet dead, and he was stiff and sore from his mauling at Allen's hands and hungry, and he didn't give a damn.

He rode down the middle of the town's neat street and pulled up before a picket fence to which was nailed a doctor's shingle. It was now the supper hour and there were few people on streets. Those who were abroad glanced but once at him with a startled kind of fixity and thereafter kept their faces averted.

He ignored the significance of this, also. Dismounting, he lifted Allen's still limp body from the saddle and carried it up to Dr. Peter Sloane's door.

A small, gray woman answered his knock and without betraying the alarm evident elsewhere in the town, motioned him into a small waiting room. She vanished, spoke softly behind a partition, and the doctor appeared. He was a short, balding, round-bodied man with heavily, florid features, who lifted McKinnon's burden from him with a surprising show of strength, and spilled it onto a couch.

He bent professionally above King Allen's still unconscious form for a moment, his fingers making swift exploration. Then he straightened and glanced at McKinnon.

"A man shouldn't play with dynamite," he said. "That's a lesson even a boy like King has got to learn sooner or later. He

needs patching bad, but he's out and he can't feel his hurts. You're bent in a couple of places, too, boy. I've got just the prescription for you."

Dr. Peter Sloane turned briskly to a cabinet, reached down a fine bottle of whisky, and poured a generous tumblerful, handing it to McKinnon. Jay drank it with relish. The doctor grinned.

"We was just sitting down to supper. Martha will have an extra plate on, already. Go on back and wrap yourself around some vittles. Anybody will tell you Pete Sloane's sister can do more for a man's belly than I can for his body. I'll be with you directly. I'd admire to hear what you got to say about this, boy."

THE DOCTOR pushed McKinnon out of the office and closed the door in his face. From the back of the house came the welcome smell of food. McKinnon moved toward the kitchen.

"Make yourself comfortable," the gray woman told Jay kindly. Then, after a pause, "That was King Allen you brought in."

"Seems like," McKinnon answered.

"King Allen and his Crown riders have kept Doctor Pete in business the last five years with the damage they've done to others," Martha Sloane said. "This is the first time I ever saw King ride into Allentown upside down."

"He didn't do it a-purpose," McKinnon told her drily.

"Of course not," the little woman answered with spirit. "He rode out a little before noon with Maggie Desmond. I saw them ride off up the street. I been waiting a long time for a man to show up with enough gumption to pay him off for the kind of treatment he's been giving that girl. Real men have been kind of scarce in our county lately."

"Why?" McKinnon asked.

"Because they get killed off," Martha Sloane said matter-of-factly. "You like the rare end of a roast or the browned one?"

"The middle," McKinnon told her. "I'd admire knowing why a good man can't hold onto his chips in your town, ma'am—why Allen and his Crown outfit keeps plowing them under."

"It's simple enough," the gray little woman said. "If they won't sign with the

Crown, they've got to be killed or get out of the country. If they weren't they might join up with Maggie Desmond and her father. If many of them did that the Crown would have a chore it couldn't handle. And King Allen was raised to know how to handle any chore that came along—one way or another."

Martha Sloane set a coffee cup down in front of Jay McKinnon and poured it full.

"You swallow that while we're waiting for Doctor Pete, and I'll try to tell you what you've got yourself into," she said. "Somebody ought to. I don't suppose anybody else but me will do it. Talking about King Allen and his Crown outfit has got to be kind of a painful habit in this town and most folks have given it up."

It was the kind of a story a man encountered wherever fences were strung and cattle grazed. Bill Desmond and the Allens had started from similar beginnings. Through good seasons and bad, with the stubborn tenacity of building cattlemen, they had extended their holdings until at last they shared a common boundary, between them dominating the county in which their ranches lay.

The quarrel between them had not been inevitable, but the stage had been set for it. It had come when old John Allen passed away.

His son, not content with what the previous generation had built, had attempted to buy the Desmond ranch. Failing in this, he had courted Bill Desmond's daughter and had drawn deuces here, also, since even as a schoolgirl Maggie Desmond had dreamed of a man cast in a different mold than King Allen.

It had become a cutthroat game then, with the Crown protecting itself by hiring the county law and intimidating those who might have interfered. Bill Desmond fought back, backing his daughter's decision and protecting his won boundaries, but clinging to a square man's code until his buckboard lost a wheel on the pass above his ranch. A passing puncher had picked him up with a broken neck and close to death.

Bill Desmond had since that day been unable to tell anyone how his accident had happened and had remained in bed in his house in the living death of total paralysis, unable to move or speak.

McKINNON sat in Martha Sloane's kitchen and sipped his cup of coffee slowly, turning over in his mind the things the doctor's sister had told him. These were the things about a piece of country a man did not see in riding through. These were the kind of things a man who had no roots was never forced to face himself.

McKinnon understood now, without further explanation from Martha Sloane, why Maggie Desmond had kissed King Allen in the little park in the noonday sun. He understood now what she'd meant when she said McKinnon had possibly saved her life and had certainly saved her ranch—that she had been ready to play her last chips.

Alone, faced against the strength of King Allen's Crown outfit and with the burden of her helpless father constantly in her mind, the easiest solution for the girl was a compromise with her enemy. Married to King Allen, she would on the surface have a share in both ranches and security for both her father and herself. It was not a question of man and woman, nor of love or desire; it was a question of existence, itself.

McKinnon thought that if he were a woman, faced with Maggie Desmond's problems, he would have made his peace with King Allen. And because of this, his admiration for this girl, who had worn brush-country gear with the same sureness that a dancer wore a velvet gown, increased sharply.

He was about to ask Martha Sloane more concerning the girl when Doctor Pete came in. The little medico frowned.

"I hoped you'd gone ahead and eaten," he said. "I just showed young Allen out the front door. He's still a little wobbly, but he's so mad even his breath is poison. You've got to get a move on—and on a better horse than the one you rode in here. You'll find her a little fat, maybe, but I got a good mare in the barn. Take her, but take good care of her and see she gets back to me."

"Now?" McKinnon asked.

"Now!" Dr. Sloane nodded. "I don't mind patching a man, but I sure hate to bury him. And King Allen can't risk leaving you above ground. If it got around that one man had broken King's nose and got away with it, somebody else might

get the notion to try. If enough gents got the same idea at the same time, King Allen would be finished and the Crown's back broken. They're hated here, almost as much as they're feared. Get moving, boy!"

McKinnon shook his head. "Directly, maybe," he said. "But not till after I've sampled Miss Martha's dinner. I don't often get a chance at something like that."

"You don't understand what I'm trying to tell you," Pete Sloane said uneasily. "King's going to be back down here in a few minutes with Tip Benbow, the marshal. Soon as they take you over you'll need the coroner, not a medico."

"Some folks have thought that before," McKinnon said. He turned to Doctor Pete's sister. "You reckon that roast's about ready to serve, ma'am?"

III

DINNER, in Martha Sloane's kitchen was but half done when the front door of the house burst open and two men came with swift strides back along the hall. One was King Allen, his once handsome but now broken and swollen features liberally stiffened with Dr. Sloane's court plaster.

The other was a tall and rangy man of middle age, fastidiously dressed, who moved with the rolling, finely balanced ease of a man vain of his skill and his reputation. The small, beautifully worked silver star pinned to the tight-fitting vest under his box-tailed jacket was unnecessary in identifying him as the marshal of this town.

Dr. Sloane sat motionless at the head of the table, making no protest at this sudden, unbidden entry into his house. Quiet anger was alive in his eyes, but it went no further than that. His sister, however, was not content to sit. Throwing her napkin onto the table before her, she rose so suddenly that her chair spilled over backward.

"Tip Benbow, you know better than this!" she snapped. "Get out of here—both of you! You may own this town and this county and half of the state, for all I know, but this is my house."

Benbow's cold marble features eased, and he grinned almost kindly at the gray little woman. "A man has got to do busi-

ness as he sees it, Martha," he said in a conciliatory tone. "You got a trouble-maker here and I want him. I don't mean no fuss with you or Pete."

"For a big man you're as spineless as a jellyfish, Tip Benbow," Martha said angrily. "You going to spend the rest of your life dirtying your hands in the mud King Allen and his ruffians kick up in Blue Valley?"

The marshal colored slightly. "I'm going to earn my pay, Martha." He swung his head toward McKinnon. "Get your hat, mister. Allen, here, has signed a complaint against you. He claims you're a drifter Maggie Desmond has imported to build a couple of fires here in Blue-town. We're going to stop that kind of thing before it gets started."

For all his gentleness toward Martha Sloane, there was iron hardness in Tip Benbow. McKinnon felt it. He shrugged.

"I haven't finished supper yet," he protested mildly. "Sit down. We'll talk about this when I'm through."

"The hell with that!" King Allen growled thickly. "We ain't got all night. Let's get going, Tip."

The marshal took a step forward, with Allen pressing close behind him.

McKinnon tossed his napkin onto the table then and hooked up the drawn gun lying ready in his lap. He swung this unhurriedly toward the two men.

"I said sit down!" he repeated. "I never let business come before pleasure, and this meal is the first real one I've sat down to in a coon's age."

King Allen and the marshal of Allentown looked at the steady barrel of the gun in McKinnon's hand and halted.

McKinnon glanced at Martha Sloane and grinned at them. "Be more sociable if we didn't have all this hardware around," he suggested. "Shuck yours on to that sideboard—kind of carefully."

Benbow, his face impassive, obeyed first. Allen followed suit reluctantly. McKinnon indicated chairs along the wall. They dropped into them. Martha Sloane picked up her chair and sat down again. Doctor Pete was grinning. McKinnon holstered his own weapon.

Benbow spoke to him quietly. "Mister, you've got a lot to learn about Big Blue County!"

"I reckon," McKinnon agreed. "But it

goes two ways. You and Allen and anybody else who tries to slap a saddle onto me have got a lot to learn about Jay McKinnon, too! There's a paper there if you boys want to split it between you and read for a spell. I won't be long." Turning his head, McKinnon smiled at Martha Sloane. "I could do with some more of those spuds, ma'am, if there's plenty."

Doctor Pete's sister smiled widely. "Mr. McKinnon, I grew these potatoes for you!" she said.

THE MEAL progressed in silence for several minutes. At the far end of the table Doctor Pete's eyes were twinkling with suppressed delight, but he kept his face immobile. King Allen, obviously suffering acute discomfort from the marks of his tangle with McKinnon, stirred restlessly in his chair. Tip Benbow, with the magnificent personal control of his kind, sat motionless, his eyes upon McKinnon, steady with speculation.

Presently Martha Sloane's head raised and she looked directly at the marshal of Allentown.

"You could be having supper with us here tonight yourself, Tip," she said. "If you'd give up being a whipped dog and walk on your own feet."

In spite of his control Benbow winced a little, and he answered her with more sharpness than he had shown before. "Martha, one of the things I could never stomach was a woman who meddled in a man's business."

Doctor Pete's sister continued to look steadily at Benbow. "Is that by any chance the reason you're helping that spoiled, bull-headed young fool beside you hound little Maggie Desmond off of the ranch she was born on?"

"Maggie Desmond is plowing her own furrows, Martha," Benbow said stiffly. "About the only thing she hasn't tried, to turn the Crown upside down, is to bring in a gunhawk on the prod and it looks like she's got to that, now, with McKinnon showing up. We don't want a full scale range war here—any of us—and I'm doing my damndest to keep one from flaring up. That Desmond can marry King, here, or tell him to go to hell or spit in his eye, and I won't care. But whatever she does, she's going to do legal. I got to see to that."

Martha Sloane sat even more uprightly in her chair. "There was a time, Tip, when I thought you were about the biggest man I'd ever known, about the most honest. It must have cost King Allen a lot of money to bring you around to where you'd pick on a poor defenseless girl and

Allen's weapons up from the sideboard and balanced them in his hand. He looked at the marshal.

"I'm under arrest?" he asked.

"Yes. For assault with intent to kill."

"With intent to live would be closer to it," McKinnon murmured. He handed the two guns to the marshal and added his own. "That being the case, I reckon these go to you," he added.

At the head of the table, with alarm in his eyes, Pete Sloane stared at McKinnon. His glance touched the surrendered weapons.

"Boy," he said quietly, "you're about the stupidest man I've ever known!"

McKinnon grinned. "When I give up my iron, I like to do it in front of competent witnesses that are apt to remember just how it was, later on. Better to do that than to hand my gun over at the jail-house where there's nobody to see whether I was armed or not, in case some kind of trouble broke out, and I turned up dead in the morning."

Tip Benbow flushed. "You think I'd pull that kind of a deal, McKinnon?" he snapped. "Kill an unarmed prisoner and claim he was armed and I shot in self-defense?"

"I think anybody would do anything if the sign was right," McKinnon said quietly. "It just depends what pressures are against them and how hard they're pushing. Maybe Miss Martha doesn't think so, but I reckon you're human enough to work the same way, Marshal. Let's go."

SADDLE horses which had not been in evidence when McKinnon rode in now lined the hitch-racks along Allentown's street. A couple of fronts which were obviously saloons appeared to be doing a good business. However, most other doorways were closed and lamps unlit behind them.

Town traffic appeared to have vanished. There were, however, saddle men here and there along the walk. As McKinnon and his companions passed several groups of these, Jay saw satisfied amusement on the faces of the men. Out of curiosity he glanced at the brands on the horses at the rails. Each of them bore a simplified crown—a marking similar to that which appeared on guns and hardware of English manufacture.

THE BAD MAN



What could have twisted up his
soul,
And clouded all his senses;
And so distorted his control
And choice of recompenses;
And set his course to such a goal
Against all evidences?

What could have so disguised the
prize
That evil should inspire him;
Or so have blinded human eyes
That glamour should attire him;
Or have made people so unwise
That any could admire him?

—Clarence E. Flynn

see only one side of a squabble. Supposing you and young King Allen do the rest of your waiting for Mr. McKinnon out on the front porch. It's getting kind of stuffy in here, and I don't like the smell."

McKinnon had been cleaning up the crumbs of a large slab of pie. He pushed the plate back from him.

"I'll go along with them, ma'am," he said. "Thanks, just the same. I don't like to keep even the law waiting any longer than I find it necessary."

"That's what I like—a man that's prompt!" Tip Benbow said wryly.

McKinnon picked Benbow's and King

As the marshal with his prisoner and King Allen approached the squat stone building which housed the jail, McKinnon realized that several of the groups they had passed had united, and that quite a bunch was following them along the walk. Tip Benbow also seemed aware of those men trailing them. McKinnon could feel the tension mounting in the man.

As Benbow fitted the key into the door of the jail, he spoke to King Allen. "Do you always have to be so damned sure in everything?" he complained with sibilant softness. "Having your boys in town full force is really rubbing my nose in it and you know it!"

Allen chuckled without humor. "There's only one way to play a winning game, Tip. And my old man taught me how it was done, a long time ago. Let's get inside."

The marshal kicked the door open. Allen jostled McKinnon through the opening. Benbow touched a lamp alight and kicked the door closed again, shooting the bolt on it. Crossing to his desk Benbow lifted a printed form there, glancing at McKinnon.

"The law says I got to read the complaint against any prisoner to him when he's booked. Want to hear it?"

King Allen shoved forward. "The hell with that, Tip!" he growled. "That's not the complaint we're going to hang the bucko on. He's going to be strung up for Gimpy Carter's murder."

Benbow blinked. "Are you crazy, King?" he protested. "The crippled old hand you've got on pension as yard boy at the Crown? Hell, I saw him on the street, down there by Doc Pete's, not five minutes ago!"

"So did I," Allen agreed imperturbably. "Just the same, he's going to be dead in the morning and the complaint I'll sign will claim McKinnon killed him. Draw it up, Tip."

"Hold on!" Benbow snapped with sudden stoniness. "This gent is just a moving drifter that maybe Maggie Desmond talked into a try for some easy money. He's not getting a shell game for his hide worked on him in my town, King!"

"No?" King Allen asked easily. "There's a newspaper over in the county seat that would admire getting a certain story about Tip Benbow, the toughest marshal in the

state. All about a favorite niece that's married a brush-popping kid, up on the headwaters of the Blue. About setting this niece and this kid up on a spread of their own. About things not going right up there and the niece and her husband needing more and more money all the time. Notes to pay off and a house that burned down and doctor's bills for a baby. So much money Tip Benbow hasn't a nickel he could call his own for two years—"

"Hold it, King!" Benbow said in a ragged voice.

"So much money the marshal of Allentown hasn't dared to ask the woman he's in love with to marry him because he hasn't anything to support her with. So much money that he's had to go to a man he hates for loans—loans that'll take him years to pay back out of his salary. Draw up that complaint, Tip, or tomorrow that newspaper is going to know just how much Crown money you've put in your pocket!"

Benbow's pallid forehead was wet with sweat. He leaned heavily across his desk, supporting himself on his hands.

"Part of our deal was that you'd never talk, King," he said quietly. "Now McKinnon's heard what I hated like hell to let even you know."

Allen nodded, still undisturbed. "That's so you'd have as good a reason as me for wanting to get rid of him, Tip. Draw that complaint. And don't get any reckless ideas. There's enough of my boys at the windows of this office right now to make a lead-bored pepper box of you at the first wrong move."

IV

BENBOW stared for a long moment at Allen, then sank slowly into his seat. Pulling the pad of complaint forms to him, he looked up across them at McKinnon.

The man's pride was monumental. McKinnon saw that. Pride so vast he could not face letting a woman know the real reason he had not spoken to her of marriage. Pride so dominant that further dishonesty was more welcome than risking general knowledge of the hold King Allen had over him and how it had been obtained. Benbow struggled with his pride, the violence of the struggle apparent in

his eyes. McKinnon felt pity for him.

"When the other gent has got the cards, Marshal," McKinnon said softly, "you got to let him take the pot."

Tip Benbow's pen scratched laboriously across the pad of complaint forms before him. Presently he straightened wearily. King Allen crossed the room with a brisk stride, picked up the pen, and scratched a bold signature across the foot of the form. Ripping the sheet from the pad, he crossed it twice and thrust it back at Benbow.

"There you are, Tip," he said, "all legal, like I promised you we'd keep any business you did for the Crown. We're going to find Gimpy Carter in the weeds out on the other side of the bridge about sunrise. Seems he seen McKinnon bringing me in across my saddle tonight and stopped him. There was words and McKinnon cut him down.

"Soon as the town's had time enough to hear what happened the boys will come down with a rope and take McKinnon off your hands. When they do, put up a little fight if you've got to to make you feel better, but be mighty careful. I got some pretty rough lads on my pay-roll these days and one of them might like adding Tip Benbow's name to the notches on his gun. Don't give any of them the chance."

Turning, Allen crossed to the door, shot the bolt back, and stepped out into the night. McKinnon remained standing, looking at the marshal of Allentown.

"We better get this straight, Benbow," he said quietly. "I just happened on Allen when he was roughing up the Desmond girl out on the slopes this noon. He tried getting a little rough with me and I had to quiet him. All I got out of Miss Desmond for it was a warning to get out of the county as quick as I could. I'm not a hiring man and I'm in nobody's pay. You got to understand that."

"I figured it'd be something like that, McKinnon," Benbow said. "The hell of it is that it don't make any difference. Allen's afraid of you, and that's enough. He's going to have that girl's Big D Ranch. I'm in to him for six thousand dollars. When he's got the ranch, he's going to hand my notes back, marked paid. That's what counts with me. It's got to."

McKinnon shrugged. "I always had a dislike of getting hanged. Always tried to avoid it, where I could. I don't aim to

be hanged this time, either."

"Allen's going too far this time," Benbow agreed. "Before he's just asked me to make a trespass stick or a warrant for assault. All I had to do was cool a Desmond rider in the lockup for a couple of days and put him on a horse pointed out of the county. But what the hell can I do? If I turned you loose, talk would get around that Tip Benbow had let a prisoner escape. That, and the stuff Allen promised to get into the county paper would finish me. I been a whole damned lifetime making my name what it is; I can't let go, McKinnon."

The man paused, scrubbing a tired hand across his face. "Anyway," he went on, "the town's full of Crown boys. If I was to hand you your gun and open that door for you, you wouldn't get twenty feet. I need a drink." He pulled open a drawer of his desk and set out a bottle. "You might as well join me, McKinnon. You've got till morning."

McKINNON accepted the bottle when it was offered and drank sparingly, unwilling to wash the lingering taste of Martha Sloane's dinner from his mouth.

"All right, Benbow," he said. "The hell with me for the minute. What about Maggie Desmond and her father?"

"A woman's different than a man," Tip Benbow muttered. "Particularly a young one, like Miss Desmond. About the only part of her she has to protect is her virtue. She doesn't have to make her living by her reputation in a trade like mine, where a reputation is all you've got to stand up beside you in a tight. She doesn't even have to worry about making a living. She's young and pretty and she'll get a man who'll make her living for her—for her old man too, even if he is an invalid. Allen won't pay her anywhere near what the Big D is worth, but he'll pay her something before he's through. She can get along on that till she's married. After that it won't make any difference."

"You're making a kind of nasty trade to save your own skin, Benbow," McKinnon said gravely.

"The hell with my hide!" the marshal growled. "I've risked it plenty before now. It's more than that, McKinnon. It's that niece of mine and her husband, up the valley—a couple of kids that think

Tip Benbow is the best damn man that ever lived. They've needed a lot of help and they're going to need more before they're on their own feet. Kids starting out with a lot of bad luck knocking their ears down have got to have something to believe in, and those kids believe in me."

"That's all there is to it, Benbow?" McKinnon asked. "Just those kids up the valley?"

The marshal stared moodily across his desk for a long moment. Finally he shook his head slowly.

"No," he said reluctantly. "No, that ain't all. I guess you're entitled to know, McKinnon. I've been in love with Martha Sloane ever since she came to town with Doctor Pete. When those kids up the valley have got their feet under them and don't need any more help and I've got myself out of this mess with King Allen, I'm going to marry her—if she still believes in me. A man has got the right to want something out of all the living he does. He's got the right to try and get it, the best way he can."

McKinnon felt a strong tug of sympathy. There was essential strength and essential goodness in the man across the desk from him. There was also a staggering folly. Tip Benbow was in quicksand, and his struggles only sank him deeper.

"A man makes a hell of a mistake, measuring the size of his own boots, Benbow," McKinnon said quietly. "He does better to let other folks measure them for him. If he don't, he's apt to think his tracks are a hell of a lot bigger than they really are. I'm kind of sorry about this, but—"

Jay leaned forward as though to set the whisky bottle still in his hands down on the desk before the marshal of Allentown. However, the motion was intentionally deceptive. He tipped the bottle sharply upward in a sudden reversal of movement so that its thick, cast base struck the point of Benbow's unprotected chin. The man's body stiffened reflexively, then slanted back loosely in the chair. Setting the bottle on the desk top, McKinnon stepped swiftly around and caught Benbow's body as it slid down.

This was, he thought, his moment of greatest risk. King Allen had boasted of Crown riders posted at the windows of the office. If any of them yet remained at

the panes, all of the chips left in this game would go down at once.

However, there was no alarm. McKinnon lifted Tip Benbow's limp body and carried the man back through the corridor leading to a small block of cells. The gates of these all stood open.

Jay dumped his burden on a cot within the first one, rifled the key-snap at Benbow's belt for a large cell key dangling there, and locked the gate. Returning to the office, he retrieved his own sixgun and moved to the door. With his hand on the bolt he paused for a moment.

IT WAS, he thought, somewhat more than an hour since he had been escorted from Dr. Sloane's house by Allen and the marshal of Allentown—perhaps thirty or forty minutes since Allen himself had left the jail building. There was sufficient sound of casual movement from the street outside to indicate Crown riders were still along it in force, and although Allen's men apparently had ceased to watch at the windows of Benbow's office, hardly enough time had elapsed for them to give up the outside watch Allen had threatened.

Tip Benbow had promised him he could not get twenty feet from the door without being cut down, if he made a break. McKinnon thought this was probably true. Still, as he had told Benbow, he was in no mood to be hanged in the morning and a man gained nothing without risking something to win it.

Reaching out, he tripped the latch on the door. As he did, a sudden shout sounded down toward the foot of the street.

The shout was picked up and rolled between the buildings in an increasing angry tide to which others joined their voices. The shouting lasted but for a moment, then was abruptly cut short and punctuated by a sharp rattle of gunfire and the thunder of hard-ridden horses.

Palming his gun, McKinnon hooked the door open with his toe and with one stride stepped out into the night.

Men afoot along the street—obviously stationed there by King Allen—were scuttling for cover, guns in hand, loosing a sporadic fusillade of hurried shots at half a dozen low-bent riders hammering up the center of the street, head-on toward the

jail. A Crown man on the opposite walk saw McKinnon and yelped, accentuating his shout with a quick shot which dusted sparks from the stone wall at McKinnon's shoulder.

Jay automatically tipped a shot at the man in reply and the fellow ducked frantically for cover. Near at hand, an old man, running with a peculiarly unsteady stride, broke from a doorway and came hobbling with a kind of frenzy down toward McKinnon.

Two angry, hard-running Crown men were in pursuit of him. McKinnon could not be certain of identification, but there was a possible irony involved here which appealed to his fancy. He rocked his gun up and spilled the first of the old man's two pursuers with a slug in the thigh. He snapped a shot at the second and missed. The fellow wheeled desperately and dived into another doorway.

The old man, unaware his pursuit had been checked, came loping painfully on. McKinnon stepped full into the center of the walk and caught his arm. The old man struggled desperately, too frightened to reach for the ungainly gun sagging in his worn shell belt.

At the same moment the riders who had been hammering up the street reached the front of the jail and milled there. One of them, boyish in silhouette, shrilled a ragged command:

"McKinnon, you fool, hit this empty saddle!"

McKinnon looked up to see Maggie Desmond's face above him, white with excitement and tension, the reins of a led horse trailing from her fingers. He seized the reins and jerked the old man beside him close.

"You Gimpy Carter?" he asked sharply. The old man muttered dazed and unintelligible assent.

Bending, McKinnon half-threw the old man across the saddle of the led horse and vaulted up behind him. Maggie Desmond and those with her had already wheeled and were pointed back up the street. Heeling the horse carrying the old man and himself, McKinnon burrowed into their group and rode hard with them back in the direction from which they had come, aware that it was a close thing at best. The disorganization the sudden appearance of the girl and her companions

in town had worked on the Crown crew was wearing off. Allen's men were methodically sniping at them.

HOWEVER, there is magic in the bold thing—the sudden thing. And those with the sand to try can occasionally work miracles. McKinnon heard the rattling of the planking of the bridge at the edge of town under the hooves of the horse he rode. There were no empty saddles about him. Maggie Desmond was just ahead. And so she had done next to the impossible.

For the moment one thing was certain in McKinnon's mind. It was better to be riding fast with her, even on the road to hell, than to be waiting in Tip Benbow's jail for a bunch of Crown riders to slip a noose around his neck at sunrise.

Half an hour after leaving the county road, the party slanted around the foot of a top ridge and came suddenly into the lantern-lighted yard of a ranch, where there was evidence of modest prosperity and efficiency of operation. The yard was raked clean. The corrals, barns, and other outbuildings were in good repair and the paint on their siding was no more than a season old.

Above the yard, on a knoll of its own, was a sprawling, half-timber house—a lower floor of cut fieldstone and an upper of brightly varnished peeled logs. Generously overhanging eaves were there to break the sun of summer and the drive of winter wind. It was the kind of a house which could belong to neither a man nor a woman alone but to both. The marks of each were upon it.

A queer feeling settled on McKinnon as though he had ridden far most of his life to reach this place. As Maggie Desmond and those who had ridden into Allentown with her swung down in the yard, he understood what had before been obscure to him concerning this tangle in the valley of the Blue.

The Desmond Big D Ranch was, as its name implied, a big place. In so rich a valley as this and unhampered by the drain of being constantly on the defensive, the Big D could be very profitable. Maggie Desmond's place was not, as he had before supposed, a typical, rundown establishment, desperately and inefficiently operated by a girl unequal to the task.

This ranch, which King Allen wished to unite with his own Crown, could very well be a property more valuable than the Crown itself, a prize with enough to pawn to make Allen forget all the rules of decency.

V

MCKINNON dropped from behind the saddle of the horse he had been riding and pulled Gimpy Carter with him.

A couple of yards away Maggie Desmond was speaking briskly to one of her men. "Get my big roan out of the barn. He's the fastest horse in the county. Put a big saddle up on him. This McKinnon is a long built man. Take a pair of saddlebags up to the kitchen and load them with grub. But make it fast. McKinnon's got to be long gone by sunrise."

McKinnon moved up beside the girl. He touched her arm respectfully.

"Wait a minute, ma'am," he protested. "I told you yesterday I didn't like riding fast and far—especially at night, and on somebody else's horse. Your friend King Allen had a notion he was going to stretch my neck, come sunrise. You kind of disappointed him, coming in with your boys when you did. I reckon I owe you something for that, and from the kind of trouble I hear you're in, maybe you can use the only kind of coin I've got."

The Desmond girl looked keenly at him. McKinnon regretted his big, awkward-looking body. He regretted the clay and sandstone commonplaceness of his features. He thought it would be something to have a girl like this look at him just once with something more than impatient interest.

"How close does the devil have to be on your tail before you get some common sense, McKinnon?" she asked acidly. "This ride to town wasn't my idea. I know better than to cross the Crown bunch in the open unless I have to. King Allen has been waiting for some move of mine he could use against me. This is it." Her head tilted toward the veranda of the house. "You can thank Doctor Pete that you aren't in Tip Benbow's lockup. And if gunpowder is the coin you're talking about, I don't want any pay. Not even the Big D is worth risking the lives of a lot of men."

McKinnon eyed the veranda of the house. Dr. Sloane's round figure appeared from the shadows and came down the steps. A wry, self-conscious look was on his face.

"Look, now, Maggie, let's get this straight," he protested. "You and McKinnon, both. This wasn't my idea, either. I got to patch folks up—good, bad, or indifferent, just as they come to me. I got no right to have anything to do with something that might get a lot of others shot up. Martha made me ride out here to tell you what had happened to McKinnon."

"Miss Martha was worried about me?" McKinnon grunted curiously. The little doctor shrugged. "Don't know as I'd say that for sure," he said. "But she was worried about somebody. Maybe even Tip Benbow. Don't think Tip's ever had a prisoner hanged on him. Specially one he knew was innocent in the first place. That kind of thing would be hard on a man like Tip. Martha might have been thinking of that."

McKinnon nodded. When a man loved a woman as much as it seemed likely the marshal of Allentown loved the doctor's sister, and when a woman loved a man as much as Martha Sloane obviously loved Benbow, and when there was something a rootless drifter could do to help them, McKinnon thought he had no choice.

And there was Maggie Desmond.

Tonight, because a drifter had become involved in the thing which faced her and his life was in danger, she had made a bold move against King Allen, which she had refused to make in her own behalf. For this, also, a drifter had an obligation.

McKinnon touched Peter Sloane's arm. "Doc," he said, "supposing you tell me. What happens now? Miss Desmond came in with her boys and burned a little powder in town. I had already settled a couple of things with Benbow and slipped out of his jail when she showed up. Allen don't know that and Benbow being the kind of a man he is, he'll be slow in admitting an unarmed prisoner slid away from him. Too, I nicked a couple of boys there on the street in order to pick up the man I was supposed to be hanged in the morning for killing—before they made a corpse out of him. Allen's going to credit Miss Desmond. So what happens?"

SLOANE answered without hesitation. "This is what Allen's been praying for. This is what I've been afraid was coming. There's been violence in town so there'll be some right behind King. He'll force Tip Benbow to swear in his Crown boys as a posse. They'll be out here by sunrise. When it's over, you won't be a problem to anybody, McKinnon. Me and any of Maggie's crew that hasn't got sense to get off the Big D before Allen shows up will be ready for planting alongside you. By breakfast Maggie will have to make peace the best way she can and the Big D will have a new boss."

Maggie Desmond cut in sharply, "That's my worry, both of you! McKinnon, get down to the barn and get the stirrups of that saddle adjusted to your long legs. Doctor Pete, you ride along with McKinnon far enough to get him started over Rainbow Pass before you turn off to town. I'm sending the boys off to the south line camp to get them out of the way. Cookie and I will be here to take care of anything that happens when the sun comes up. I don't want any of the rest of you. Get moving!"

McKinnon looked at the girl for a long moment, wondering just how a homely man could tell a woman that there was nothing on the face of the earth worth running from, that no woman should have to wage a war alone. But words did not come easily to him and he didn't know how to talk to a woman. He shrugged and turned away. Doctor Sloane moved with him.

The man Maggie Desmond had already sent down to the barn had the big roan horse saddled. While the Big D rider trotted to the kitchen to fill a pair of saddle bags with food for him, McKinnon adjusted the stirrups and pulled himself up into leather. Doctor Pete moved away and came back astride his own horse. Gimpy Carter, also up on a Big D animal, rode up to McKinnon.

"Since you hauled me out of that tight in town, saved my hide from that razor-backed young devil I been working for, I figure I'll string with you, mister," Carter said.

McKinnon shook his head. "With Doctor Sloane," he corrected. "Doc will look out for you."

Carter fell back, eying Doctor Pete un-

easily. The Big D rider came back from the kitchen with the saddlebags. McKinnon dropped them in place, then kneed his horse back to where Maggie Desmond stood.

She looked up, a brief smile on her tense face. "Good luck, McKinnon," she said with a sudden warmth and gentleness. "You've given me something I'll never forget—a picture of King Allen lying helpless in the dust at my feet, fairly beaten. I don't think you know how much that means to me. Good-by."

Before McKinnon could answer her, she turned and walked briskly up the steps to the veranda of the house.

"Kind of a hard place to ride away from, ain't it?" Doctor Sloane asked quietly.

"Yes," McKinnon agreed. "But I reckon I'm a riding man. She seems to think so. Let's go, Doc."

"Up Rainbow Pass—out of the valley?" the doctor asked shrewdly.

"We'll talk about that directly," McKinnon said. He girmed his horse forward.

When the lights of the Big D had fallen out of sight behind McKinnon and his two companions, he pulled up, ostensibly to build and light a cigarette. He shot a sharp glance at Gimpy Carter.

"You been a long time in this valley, Uncle?" he asked.

Old Man Carter snorted derisively. "I was the first hand King Allen's dad hired when the Crown was still a square-mile homestead patch," he said.

McKinnon nodded. "You keep up on folks and their doing along the Blue?" he suggested.

"Always have," Gimpy Carter agreed. "An old coot's got to have something to keep his brain from rotting in his skull."

"Know the young fellow and his wife that bought themselves a section somewhere up on the headwaters in the last couple of years? Got a new baby, I understand."

GIMPY CARTER nodded, and said, "Bob Fentrice and his wife. Sure, I know. Stopped in there for a chat with them one day. Seemed tolerably troubled for young 'uns and weren't too friendly."

"They're the ones," McKinnon agreed. "You light out for their place as fast as

you can go, Carter. Haul young Fentrice out of bed and tell him his wife's uncle needs him in town—badly. See he gets there before sunup if you can."

Doc Sloane's eyes widened. Gimpy Carter seemed astonished. "The devil!" he grunted. "I figure you was plain maverick, drifting by. So you're related to the Fentrice gal, eh?"

"I didn't say so," McKinnon said. "Get going. You're short of time, already."

Gimpy Carter wheeled his mount about and lined off up the valley. McKinnon snapped his cigarette into the dust, walked his horse across it, and started on. Pete Sloane rode up beside him.

"You're supposed to be heading out of the valley over Rainbow Pass," he reminded gently.

McKinnon grinned at him. "A gent that doesn't always do what he's supposed to sometimes lives longer than one that does."

Doc Sloane accepted this, riding in silence for several moments. Finally he lifted his head again.

"So that's why you come into our valley," he murmured. "You're the one that's been staking those two kids up on the headwaters. Some of us have been wondering where they've been getting their money."

"The wind blew me into this valley, Doc," McKinnon said. "Nothing else. That girl on the headwaters is Tip Benbow's niece."

"Benbow!" Sloane was obviously astonished. He shook his head wryly. "So it makes sense, finally. Those kids have needed quite a bit of cash, the way I've heard it. They would have cleaned Tip out fast. He never was one to trouble friends much. That'd leave him only one place to go for more money. A man gets his foot caught in a bear trap and it's a damned hard thing to kick out of. Martha'd sure feel better if she could know about that. She sets a store by Tip, and him and Allen have made her pretty unhappy."

"She's going to know about it, Doc," McKinnon promised steadily. "Look, how many friends does Allen have in Bluetown?"

"Them he hires, them he buys from, them that owes him, and them he can whip with his fists," Doc Sloane said grim-

ly. "And not another soul."

"And Miss Desmond?"

"Why, I reckon if those of us in town had enough sand to stick our heads around our own door posts, we'd all be with her. She's a twenty-carat little lady, McKinnon."

Jay grinned crookedly. "You don't have to sell her to me, Doc," he said. "I was bit at first look. You seen what I did to King Allen for kissing her."

"Um," the round little doctor said with a shrewd look at Jay. "A bite like that can build a hell of a fire under a man. So can a good look and a chance at something like the Big D."

"Sure," McKinnon agreed. "Miss Desmond's a man's woman and the Big D is a man's chore, but I ain't the kind of man, Doc. Not for that girl."

DOCTOR PETE'S eyes narrowed a little. "A man gets some awful funny ideas about himself. Take me, for instance. I've straddled a fence in Allentown till I'm sorer than any saddle ever made me. There's something in the wind tonight—maybe the same wind that blew you into this valley, McKinnon—that ought to send me scuttling for cover like a scared bobtail. But I've got a notion I'm going to walk out and have me a piece of it, just the same. You're not going out over the pass. You're going into town with me. I know that much already. What then, McKinnon?"

"Why then, before King Allen has a chance to get his bunch organized and head out for the Big D, we're going to take us a little vote. We're going to find out how many friends he's got, and how many will string along with Maggie Desmond."

"I'd rather try taking out my own appendix in a buckboard with a runaway team than to ride into Allentown this morning with some notion of lifting King Allen's hair. That boy don't know how to lose—in anything!"

"Then it's time he learned," McKinnon said quietly. "A man that bluffs any hand he plays can always be beaten by a bigger bluff. And that's exactly what I aim to try."

"You must be a heller at a poker table!" Doc Sloane said drily.

McKinnon grinned.

VI

THEY held their mounts an easy pace, killing the long, chill pair of hours before dawn along the road to Allentown. There was growing gray light which cast the vestige of a shadow from the bulk of their horses when they reached the little bridge at the head of the street.

Doc Sloane pulled up here, nodding at the bunch of horses lined at the rails before the jail building and a still-open saloon beside it.

"Posse's making up," he said. "Takes a certain amount of whisky, this time of day. Looks like King and Tip are about ready to ride. If they get to the Big D, you'll be missing, and me, and Gimpy Carter. Maybe one or two of Maggie's boys. But the rest of them will have stayed around her, whether she ordered them away or not. Maybe they'll dump some lead at King's bunch. He'll sure as hell be hoping they will. If they don't, with Tip to back him up, he'll round up the lot as accomplices in springing you out of jail last night. Either way, it'll be the last Maggie sees of her boys. It'll mean she's whipped, for good."

"If Allen ever gets out of town. If he rides onto the Big D."

"You're still crazy stubborn enough to try stopping him?"

McKinnon nodded. Doc Sloane shivered exaggeratedly and lifted his reins.

"Then this is where I leave you, boy," he said. "It's through the back lots to my own barn and my house for me."

McKinnon grinned at him, in no way misled. "Have it your own way, Doc," he agreed. "I'll give you five minutes. It's all I can spare. Then I'm starting up the street to have a talk with King Allen and anybody else that wants a piece of what I've got to say to him."

Doc Sloane walked his horse carefully across the deck of the little bridge to avoid noise, and vanished among the willows which followed the little creek up into the town.

Dawn came with the suddenness of the grass country. The first direct rays of the sun warmed McKinnon's back as he sat restlessly beside the little bridge leading into Allentown. The cigarette between his lips burned away the five minutes he had promised Doc Sloane.

McKinnon rode across the bridge, snapping the stub of his cigarette into the waters of the creek as he passed over it. He was, he knew, a fool. This was a gamble from which he could win nothing. Benbow might win, and Martha Sloane, and the marshal's niece and nephew on the headwaters of the Blue. Maggie Desmond might win, and Doc Sloane, and the others of the Big Blue Valley. But not Jay McKinnon.

At best he could have at the end only proof of his own folly. This was inevitable. Yet maybe it was right. A drifting man who had no claim upon anything on the face of the earth was a fool in the beginning. And so long as he drifted, he would remain a fool.

A man had no more hand in the changing of his own nature than a gambler had in the changing of his luck. A man who had no strings upon him did only the things he wanted to do. And Jay McKinnon knew that he wanted to ride King Allen and his Crown outfit into the dust more than he had ever wanted to do anything in his life.

When he rode on, he wanted to leave the Blue Valley as clean and quiet as it had seemed to him when he had ridden in.

These were the lies he told to himself as he rode up the foot of Allentown's street. His real reasons and his real desire were buried deep within him and he would not let them out, even to himself.

When McKinnon was midway up Allentown's street, a man came out of the saloon next door to Tip Benbow's office. He paused on the walk, his eyes squinting into the rising sun. Then he ducked hurriedly back into the place. The mutter of sound rising above the men gathered in the saloon was suddenly muted.

A CURIOUS detachment settled over McKinnon, and he rode so that every movement of the horse under him was transmitted loosely through his body and his joints moved freely, as though unhinged.

The first man of the group boiling onto the walk from the saloon was Tip Benbow. Behind him came King Allen, and then Allen's riders.

A number of the Crown's saddlemen split unobtrusively away from the main

group, sidling along the store fronts in either direction for forty or fifty feet, so as to embrace a good portion of the street. Three of them sauntered unhurriedly across the gravel paving to take similar stations along the far walk.

Benbow was under obvious pressure from those behind him. He stepped a pair of paces into the dust before his office and watched McKinnon's approach with eyes motionless in an impassive face. When McKinnon was within easy speaking distance, the marshal put his voice down like a barrier across the street:

"Take it easy, McKinnon!"

"My business isn't with you, Benbow," Jay answered quietly.

The marshal ignored this. "Under the law you're a fugitive, since you broke jail last night. Under the law I have to take you again—by force, if necessary."

"Why?" Jay asked. "To hang me for the murder of Gimpy Carter? Gimpy isn't dead, Benbow. I told you my business wasn't with you."

King Allen spoke from behind the marshal, his words nasty and driving and hard. "You're giving him too much time, Tip!"

McKinnon had pulled his horse up. Benbow stepped another stride into the street. A man on the walk spoke sharply. The heads of them all swiveled down the street. From behind him McKinnon heard the sound of running horses clattering across the decking of the bridge. He did not turn.

"It's Carter!" a man on the walk said. "Old Gimpy. That's the kids that bought that section on the headwaters of the Blue with him! King, that warrant of Benbow's ain't worth much with Gimpy alive on the street."

King Allen said something swiftly and sharply. The men with him began to spread out as the others had already done. McKinnon ignored them for a moment, his eyes on Tip Benbow. The marshal's face had drained of color. His back had stiffened. He seemed a bigger man than he had when he stepped down into the dust.

A door slammed a few yards up the street. Benbow's head swung toward this sound. McKinnon's eyes followed his glance. Martha Sloane had come out into the yard before the little house she shared

with her brother. Benbow's figure seemed to tense even more rigidly.

King Allen spoke for the first time to McKinnon. "If you won't do business with Tip—with me, then!"

McKinnon grinned at him. "That's what I'm here for. I'd kind of like to hear the details of the accident that crippled Miss Desmond's father. I got a notion you could give them to me."

Allen backed a little away from the awning pole against which he had been leaning. "Shuck your iron and climb down from that horse, McKinnon!" he ordered. "I'm warning you—we're all legally deputized possemen."

In the street Tip Benbow swung stiffly around. "Hold on, King," he said in a strained voice. "This has gone too far already!"

"Yes," Allen snapped raggedly. "Too far for you to back down, now, Tip. McKinnon's had his warning. Watch yourself!"

IT EXPLODED then, sooner and more abruptly than McKinnon had intended. He began a backward dive out of his saddle, aware that Allen had swiftly palmed a gun and that it was lined steadily at him, aware that Allen could not miss at this range.

The gun fired, but another was an instant before it, and even as Allen dropped the hammer of his weapon, a bullet smashed into his body, destroying his aim. Shaken, the Crown owner stayed on his feet and pivoted. McKinnon was on his back in the dust beside his horse, and under the animal's belly he could see Tip Benbow, walking steadily toward the knot of Crown men before the saloon, his gun bucking in his hand.

He saw answering Crown lead crash into Benbow's body, but the man continued his steady advance.

Rolling clear of his dancing horse, McKinnon came up with his own gun clear. He started forward at a run, flinging a hasty pair of shots into the knot about King Allen in an attempt to break up the fusillade pouring at Benbow.

A hard blow on the thigh drove his legs from under him and spilled him into the dust. He scrambled up and dropped a rifleman who was crouching behind a rain barrel up the street, with his sights

on Benbow. He drove lead at another Crown rider who was shadowed in a doorway, closer at hand. He reached the saloon awning at the same instant that Benbow did.

Clutching at an awning post for support as the marshal clutched at another, the two of them held guns low and ready. But suddenly there were no targets! Men were down on the walk, among them King Allen. Others stood flat against the saloon's front wall, hands high, their weapons lying in the planking at their feet. And senses left behind by the blinding speed of events here in the thin morning sunlight caught up again, telling McKinnon that other guns had been at work on the streets of Allentown.

A lame-legged old man's ancient six-gun. A young, shoestring rancher's rifle. Both of these from down the street in the direction of the bridge.

A doctor's shotgun. A horse pistol from under a banker's counter. Other weapons in the hands of townsmen turned out during Doc Sloane's five-minute ride up through the back lots ahead of McKinnon's entry into the street.

And under the combined impact of this resistance and the fall of their boss, the hired professional flint of the remaining Crown crewmen had turned to dust.

The banker and others from the stores along the walk herded the balance of the Crown crew into the open door of Benbow's jail. Martha Sloane and her brother ran up, detaching Tip Benbow gently from the awning post he clung to for support. A pretty girl and a white-faced young man who yet trailed his rifle, also ran up to the wounded marshal's side. A pair of volunteers lifted Benbow and carried him protesting up toward the doctor's house. The others followed.

Unattended, McKinnon clung to his awning post, wrestling with the hurt in his torn thigh, and watching the strangers milling excitedly about him—strangers who did not know him and what he had done here. This was, he thought, a drifter's reward.

Then dust was billowing up in the street before him and men who had been riding hard flung down from their horses.

Among them was a small figure which ran unerringly toward McKinnon, seeing King Allen's body lying with the others on the walk. Maggie seized McKinnon's arms with two small, strong, insistent hands, and her eyes reflected a turbulent mixture of anger, fear and joy.

"You fool!" Maggie Desmond cried to McKinnon. "You crazy, wonderful fool! What else are you going to do for me, whether I want it or not?"

McKinnon let her tear him loose from the pillar and he sat down stiffly on the edge of the walk.

"Why, ma'am," he told her with conviction which surprised him, "I've hardly got started yet."

The girl's hands changed position and he thought her arms were about him. He was shaken and only half believing. Then her cheek was pressed against his and he stiffened a little, wanting this but not wanting its recollections to torment him for months to come.

"Ma'am, I kind of need a shave and all," he protested.

"Shave!" Maggie Desmond cried. "You're beautiful!" She kissed him on the lips. "Like a mountain. Like a storm in the hills. Big and beautiful—and strong!"

McKinnon had always thought himself an ugly man. It appeared that a man could be wrong in some things and right in others. He had thought from the beginning that this valley in the full sunlight was the most beautiful he had ever seen. He had thought that this was the place in which he wanted to stay.

The trouble was, he hadn't thought far enough. If he had known he could have this woman, he would have killed King Allen with his bare hands the first time they met. It would have saved trouble. But, then, a man usually managed to do most chores the hard way, and in the end it was the pay that counted, not the work itself.

McKinnon's arms opened, and reclosed about Maggie Desmond's shoulders. He couldn't tell if she had sighed or he had squeezed the breath from her. Like she had said, he was a strong man.

Jess delivered a hammer blow
on the side of the jaw



*When Croft was
as far down as a man
could be, he knew it was—*

Time for Trouble

By J. L. BOUMA

JESS CROFT woke up to the jerking sway of the train, to the slanting sunlight of late afternoon. The red plush seat was itchy against the back of his neck. He lay still, his eyes closed, and tried vaguely to place himself. And suddenly memory flooded his brain, filling him with despair, with bitterness and scorn.

He opened his eyes and saw Mike Sullivan beside him. The grind of wheels on

rails, the jolting, the sloshing of water in brass cuspidors, all exploded in his brain at once. He jerked upright and grasped the bottle that lay alongside his thigh. He finished what was left at a gulp.

He put the bottle down, breathing heavily, his heart pounding, and found Mike watching him. "You had a good sleep," Mike said. He pointed a blunt finger at the window. "The valley's beyond that range. We'll be there in half an hour, Captain."

At once Jess swung on him.

"Don't call me that," he said thickly. "Don't even call me that again, you hear me?"

Mike's smile was one of patience. He was a thick-set man with a blunt face and a shock of graying hair, and his voice was mild when he said, "A thirty year habit is hard to break."

Jess grunted. "You're a fool for dragging me out of the gutter. And Mac-Murdy was another fool for writing you about me."

He reached again for the bottle, saw it was empty and flung it in the aisle. "For God's sakes!" he cried. "Why don't they sell liquor on trains?"

Two men near the front of the coach regarded him with annoyed expressions. He stared back with burning eyes. The large blond man on the aisle spoke with obvious anger to his companion, who shook his head. Both men shifted their gaze to Mike, then looked away.

"No need to look for trouble," Mike said softly. "There'll likely be enough of that where we're going."

"Trouble!" Jess gave a hard laugh. "What the hell do I care about trouble? Yours or mine?"

"Mine needn't concern you," Mike said mildly.

Jess didn't answer. He gazed with listless eyes through the dusty window. Rough terrain, he thought automatically. A deep canyon fell away, and he could see a stream beyond which rose massive sandstone cliffs, a blending of yellows and reds in the sunlight. The train slowed down as the engine laboriously hauled the cattle cars, boxcars and coaches into the New Mexico mountains.

Jess closed his eyes. He was a lanky young man, with a lean face that had a waxy look despite the beard stubble which

darkened his cheeks and broad chin. He wondered absently why he had come with Mike, and then knew it didn't make any difference. Nothing made any difference as long as a bottle was handy.

The thought of a drink scraped his nerves. His mouth tasted of dust. Rising, he stepped past Mike's knees, where he swayed for a moment, gripping the seat hard before lurching toward the water cooler at the end of the coach.

He gulped two cups frantically, oblivious to the stares of passengers. Then he hung the tin cup and as he turned back to his seat a sudden jolt sent him lurching violently across the aisle.

A hand gripped his arm hard. "Watch where you're going, you drunk!"

Jess looked into the face of the blond man who had stared at him a moment ago.

"Take your damn hand off me," he said in a low and raging voice. "Now!"

A murderous expression flickered in the blond man's pale eyes. "Why, you stinking—" he began.

"Let go of him, Buck," the other man said.

Buck released Jess's arm with obvious reluctance. Jess straightened and glanced at the other man, a small compact figure in a brown town suit. His clipped gray beard almost hid the thin lips, and his eyes showed arrogance and faint contempt. "On your way," he said curtly.

"And you can go to hell," Jess said.

Buck looked at the small man and pleaded, "Let me take him, boss. Right here and now." He threw Jess a wicked glance as he half rose from the seat.

The small man's eyes were still on Jess's face, and now they were without a trace of expression. "Not now," he said softly.

JESS gave a short laugh and returned to his seat. Mike looked at him with a mixture of relief and worry. He bent quickly to snap shut the leather valise at his feet, but not before Jess saw the Army Colt. He scowled at Mike.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You were bucking a couple of pretty tough customers."

"And is it any of your business?"

"It could turn out to be my business, son."

"Son!" Jess said bitterly. "My God! And we served—" He broke off and glared out the window.

"We served together a long time," Mike said. "Four years in the big war. You a cavalry lieutenant at twenty—"

"Drop it!"

"I've served under many an officer during my thirty-year hitch, and I'm honest when I say that you were the best."

"Shut up about the damned Army!"

"The best," Mike said mildly. "And after the war, Arizona. The heat of the place, the dust! I can honestly say I was glad to get away from there. A rough life, the Army. But not too bad when a man has a house and people waiting for him."

The train gathered speed and Mike leaned across Jess to stare out the window. "Take a look, son! Did you ever see prettier country?"

Jess looked without interest. The valley spread far, shaggy with yellow-green grass that ended in a hazy mist of purple mountains. The sight swam before his eyes. Gloom engulfed him, the dark horror returned—and he needed a drink!

"What the hell!" he said in a shaky voice. "You said we'd be there in half an hour!"

"We still have ten minutes. Where's your sense of time gone, lad?"

"What the hell do I need with a sense of time? I just want to get the hell off the train."

He settled into sullen silence, feeling trapped. Trapped! The picture formed in his brain against his will. Lieutenant Ambers and two troopers riding the point. The Apache warrior riding toward the narrow canyon, and Ambers giving him chase. Against orders. Ambers, young and foolish, spurring his mount to escape the monotony of barracks' life at Fort Defiance, riding hard on a wave of bravado that led to his doom.

Jess's quick decision to either sacrifice the point or ride to the rescue. Then blood and butchery in the canyon, the detail wiped out. Fifteen in all, and Sergeant Burgeson missing. While Jess himself, by some miracle of chance, hadn't even been wounded.

"It was your command, and the fault lies with you. You understood the orders. A court will decide—"

Jess had no trouble remembering the colonel's words, the harshness of his voice. Nor would he ever forget facing that court, telling the court exactly how it had happened, the trap in the canyon, the murderous fire cutting the detail down to a man.

Lieutenant Jackson and his troopers had found the mutilated bodies two days later. All but Sergeant Burgeson.

The court's decision came swiftly. Direct disobedience of orders, incompetence in the field. It is recommended that Captain Croft be broken to second lieutenant and transferred.

It could have been worse. The court could have cashiered him out of the service. That had been his first bitter thought. Then he knew that even so it was as bad as it could ever be, for he could serve half his life and never again attain a captaincy.

For the court hadn't believed him, not fully. He had read as much in the faces of the court, in the faint contempt directed at him. That alone had hurt more than their decision. So he had not waited to be transferred, but that evening had written his resignation.

A month later MacMurdy, the sutler at Fort Defiance, had found him at Albuquerque, sodden drunk, his face a ruin. For news of his disgrace had spread, and there are always those who will pick a fight with a man who is down. And MacMurdy, after trying to help and suffering a blasting refusal for his trouble, had written Mike Sullivan, who had, the year before, completed thirty years of service in the ranks with honor and had gone to join a brother and niece on a horse ranch in New Mexico.

Mike had come at once. He had found Jess near exhaustion, too weak and spent to offer further resistance. A few solid meals had helped considerably, but Mike hadn't been able to get him off the bottle entirely. No, by God, and he wasn't going to! Whisky was the only thing that could make him forget the screams of dying men, the contempt in the faces of his brother officers. And beyond them the face of the girl. . . .

All men thought him guilty. All but Mike. Something tore in him, remembering what Mike had said about him being the best. The hell with it! he thought

savagely. He straightened up as the train passed a scatter of drab gray buildings and braked to a stop alongside the depot.

HE FOLLOWED Mike out on the platform, saw Mike's grin and heard him saying, "There they are! Come along, lad."

Jess hung back as a stocky man with a sweeping gray mustache, and a slender girl with brown hair, came toward them. Mike put his arm around the girl's waist and kissed her cheek, and Jess turned suddenly at the sight and legged it down the steps and along the street, his mind full of Janice.

He shouldered his way into a saloon. "Whisky!"

He poured a drink, downed it with a shudder and poured himself another. Despair gripped him. Janice, he thought bitterly, and remembered that he'd sold the ring she'd returned to him, and had spent the money on whisky.

She ought to know about that, soldier, he told himself, staring at the bar mirror. About the diamond that sparkled on her dainty finger. He gave a harsh laugh. Major Jameson's daughter hadn't wanted any part of an officer whose future was already written in the records.

"Well, there's the drunk! How does it feel to have all those dead men on your back, drunk?"

Jess turned, flinching inwardly at the thought that news of his disgrace had reached even this remote spot. Buck was standing inside the doorway. The small man Buck called boss stood beside him, a cigar in his thin mouth.

And Jess realized as he turned that these two were either respected or feared in this part of the Territory. It was obvious in the sudden silence. Jess had often sensed this same air of silence in troops facing officers. It was a sullen-edged silence, but there was also respect in it, and beyond it a dim fear.

Then the faces took sides and regarded him with sudden hostility. He reached for the bottle, picked it up by the neck and flung it at Buck with all his strength.

Buck dodged, escaping the bottle but not its contents, which sloshed out and put wet stains across his white shirt. The small man said, "Take him, Buck."

Jess met Buck's charge with a blow that

rocked the bigger man. But by the time they'd fought two minutes he knew that he was licked. His heart hammered and his chest heaved with his effort to breathe. He felt his legs buckle as Buck smashed him above the eye. Then he was down on the rough board floor, and as he climbed to his hands and knees he heard the small man saying, "Give him the boot!"

The kick flattened him. The next swing of the boot found his temple and knocked him out. . . .

Once he came to long enough to realize that it was night and that he lay in the bed of a jolting wagon. The next time he woke up it was daylight. He looked around at a small but cheerful room, painted a pale green, with white curtains at the two windows. The feather bed was soft and he roused himself with an effort, flung the blankets back and got up.

He looked at the face in the oval dresser mirror. It was a stranger's face with the black eye, the swollen mouth, the purple bruise that spread from the temple down to the cheekbone.

Well, you did it again, soldier, he told the face, and laughed. He felt a perverse satisfaction at the sound of his laughter. He saw the shaving mug, the brush and razor at the side of the water pitcher, and he laughed again. That's fine, he thought. That's great. A shave and I'll be as good as new.

Shaving was agony, but he felt better when he'd finished. His clothes hung from the back of a chair. He frowned at the shirt, for it was freshly washed, and a tear in the sleeve had been mended. Tim's daughter, of course. Mike's niece. What was her name? Ann. Yes, that was it. Ann Sullivan.

DOWNSTAIRS, he found the kitchen. Ann Sullivan turned from the stove. She was smiling. "Well, you had a good sleep. How do you feel?"

"All right." She was a tall girl in a flowered gingham dress, with a clear tanned skin and a dusting of freckles across her nose. Her hair was braided into a knot at the nape of her neck, and her eyes were clear and without pretense.

"Where's Mike?" he asked.

"He and Dad are out on the range. I guess you must be hungry."

His stomach rolled over at the thought of food. "I could use a drink."

She looked at him, not smiling now, then turned abruptly and took a bottle from a cupboard and filled a glass. She put it on the table in front of him, the bottle beside it, and said in a voice low with intensity, "Aren't you getting pretty sick of feeling sorry for yourself?"

He felt his face grow hot with shame. She turned to the stove, then glanced at him across her shoulder.

"I can guess what you must have been through," she continued. "And I don't suppose it helped any when the major's daughter returned the ring. But don't you think it's about time you forget all that without the aid of this stuff?"

Jess stared at her. His eyes went to the glass, then back to her face. She took the coffeepot from the stove and poured a cup full. Then she stepped back and looked at him.

"Make up your mind."

Jess sighed. He picked up the glass, looked at it, then opened the back door and flung its contents into the yard. He closed the door and said, "All right, ma'am. Now if you'll fix me some breakfast, I'll eat. . . ."

Mike, his brother and a rider named Vince came in late that afternoon driving twenty-odd horses. After they were corraled, Mike told Jess, "Four-year-olds. Halter-broke, but still plenty wild. We'll start breaking 'em tomorrow for the local stage line."

"Is that where you get most of your business?"

Mike smiled. "Hardly, lad." He poked Jess lightly in the side. "How are the ribs?"

"Sore. I don't remember anything about it, but I suppose you got me out of it last night."

"Tim and myself, lad. We had to throw down on Kendel before we could get you out of there."

"Kendel? Is that the one I fought?"

"No, that's Buck Hawkins. Kendel is the small man. Three saloons in town, lad, and you had to walk into his."

"The way it looked to me, he packs a lot of weight."

"That he does," Mike said thoughtfully. "He also owns the only other horse ranch in this part of the country, as well as half

interest in a couple of mines. Not to mention the fact that he controls what little law we have around here."

"So that's it."

"That's it. Kendel came here after the war. He started big and he stayed big. He's a greedy man, lad, and he takes what he wants."

"You said on the train that there was trouble here—"

"You remember that, eh? Well, trouble has been building up, and that's a fact. We've had horses stolen, and our riders beaten up in town. It's getting so men are afraid to work for us."

"And you're certain Kendel is behind all this?"

"As certain as I'm standing here, lad," Mike rumbled. "But proving it is something else. And getting the deputy sheriff to act on that proof would be still another problem. Still and all we've managed to avoid an open fight."

"But I cocked the trigger last night," Jess said soberly. "I'm sorry, Mike."

"You needn't be. Maybe a showdown is due. And we're not alone, lad. There are half a dozen small cow outfits in the hills that have had to cotton to Kendel, so a showdown has been building up for a long time." He looked into Jess's face. "How was it the fight started yesterday, lad?"

JESS told what Buck had said. "How do you suppose he found out about that?"

"Probably in Albuquerque, or at one of the forts. There's an Army contract due, lad. For saddle mounts. I don't have to tell you that the Army is always in the market for good horses. Now I haven't told you this, but I traveled to Fort Defiance before picking you up at Albuquerque. To talk to major Jameson.

"He is the officer in charge on whose recommendation the Army is to purchase 300 mounts to be distributed to four forts in the Northern Territory of Arizona." Mike counted them off on his blunt fingers. "Fort Apache, Fort Whipple, Fort McDowell and Fort Defiance. Delivery to be made at Fort Defiance. That's a little less than a hundred miles from here, lad, and we'd like that contract. So would Kendel."

"You have the horses?" Jess asked.

"Aye, lad." Mike turned and pointed

with his hand, indicating a wooded rise in the distance. "There's a basin beyond there. Shaped like an egg, with plenty of grass and water to keep the stock from wandering. Three hundred head or more, and we worked 'em all last spring and summer breaking 'em to saddle and man."

"You were always a good man with horses."

"Stable sergeant my last ten years in the Army," Mike nodded. He glanced at Jess and added casually, "Major Jameson will be out next month to look them over and make his decision."

Jess felt bitterness rise in him again. It edged his voice when he said, "Then I'd better be gone from here next month, because my being here won't help you any."

"Because you were engaged to his daughter, is that it?"

"That's part of it."

Mike took a corncob pipe from his shirt pocket and turned it absently in his calloused hand. "The major always struck me as a fair man," he said slowly. "A bit of an aristocrat, but fair. The fact that I'm an old Army man won't influence him in his choice of horses if he thinks Kendel's are the best, and that's the way it should be. As for you being here—that's our business. I would hate to see you run, lad."

He put his hand on Jess's arm. "Come. We'll wash up and have our supper."

There was no talk of the impending trouble during supper. For the first time in many weeks Jess had the feeling of comradeship. Tim proved himself to be a man of dry humor, entirely different from his daughter, whose lively interest in current affairs astounded Jess. She plied Jess with questions of the East, wished ruefully that she had had more schooling, and wondered out loud if the time would ever come when one could buy books in town instead of having to send East for them.

It wasn't long before Jess was uncomfortably aware that she kept the talk flowing for his sake. After the hot apple pie and strong coffee, Jess had the queer feeling that she was relieved supper was over, for as the men left the kitchen for the parlor he heard her sighing deeply behind him, and turned his head to see her staring blankly out of the window.

"I think Jess'll stay with us for a while,"

Tim said to his brother, his eyes twinkling. "Am I right, Jess?"

What difference does it make? Jess thought. Then he caught himself up short. It was time to change his thoughts. "I'd like to," he said. "I'd like to very much."

"Then it's settled, Mike said, tamping tobacco into his pipe. He struck a sulphur match and raised it to the bowl. He smiled. "It won't be free room and board you'll be getting, lad. For one thing, we'd like you to check over the horse herd—"

"What Mike means," said Tim, grinning, "is that all your tomorrows will be busy days."

Jess laughed. "I think it's about time."

But in bed that night, he lay sleepless for a long time while the old horror visited him. And added to it now was the dread of facing Major Jameson. Then as sleep came over him, he found his thoughts shifting to a spray of freckles across a tanned nose, and eyes as clear and deep as a twilight sky. With an effort he put Ann Sullivan out of his mind. You know what she thinks of you, soldier, he told himself. Finally he fell asleep.

WHAT the weeks of drinking had done to him, Jess found out during the next few days. While Tim and Vince started breaking the horses for the stage line, Mike and Jess spent their time with the horse herd in the basin. After half a day of hard riding, of cutting out stock under the hot and yellow sun, sweat poured out of Jess and left him gasping.

"The poison is working out, lad," Mike told him. "You'll feel the better for it when it's gone."

They cut out a dozen head at a time and drove them into the small corral at the head of the basin, where they inspected them carefully. Jess saw at once that they were good horses, big in the chest and snorting with life, and there were only a few he recommended cutting out of the herd.

"The way it looks to me, you've made yourself a sale," Jess said.

Sheer slopes rose on three sides of the basin, wooded and rock-ribbed, and its narrow lower end spread out to a slope of meadow that ended at a stand of timber beyond which rose a range of craggy mountains.

"You've got grass, salt and water to

keep them from wandering," Jess said, "but they can be driven. Mike, you ought to either fence that lower end or keep a couple of men there on guard."

"A fence should do it," Mike agreed. "We'll string one tomorrow. And knowing Kendel, the guards might be a good idea, too. I'll ride to town in a day or two and hire a couple of hands."

That evening after supper, Jess strolled with Ann through the twilight. "How long are you planning to stay?" she asked Jess.

The question troubled him and he took his time answering. "I don't know," he admitted finally. "I've been Army so long—ten years, since I was seventeen. I guess I'm at loose ends."

"Do you regret resigning your commission?"

"No, not under the circumstances. I know the Army. Once you make a mistake and it goes on your record, it stays with you."

She stopped and faced him. "Did you make a mistake?"

"I did what I had to do."

She turned back toward the house, and said in a soft voice, "And Janice Jameison?"

He looked at her. "I guess it was the same with her, and in a way I don't blame her. She's an Army brat, Ann. It's in the family, all she's ever known. Her whole future."

"If what happened to you was her only reason for breaking the engagement, then she couldn't have had much faith in you, and I—" She broke off and laughed. "At least you're not bitter any longer."

He smiled because it was true. Somehow, he had worked the poison out of his system. The dark horror still haunted him at times, but even it was growing dim.

"It's better to file the experience and forget. And then start a new life," Ann said.

"I didn't get a very good start," he said wryly.

"That's another thing to file and forget," she laughed. "Come on. I have some lemons put away, and I'll make us some lemonade."

Two days later Mike returned from town with a sober face. He rode in alone about suppertime. Tim and Jess went outside to meet him. Mike shook his head

at his brother's question.

"Not a one. There's something afoot, and that's for certain," he said gruffly. "We've always been able to hire extra hands without trouble, but now everything in town is sealed up tight as a drum."

"You told me you people weren't alone in this. Do you suppose one of your cattlemen friends can spare a couple of hands?" Jess asked.

"They're small potatoes," Tim said, fingering his mustache. "And it's between roundups. Makes a difference. They'll have just enough men now to keep them going."

"Then we'd better stand guard—"

JESS BROKE off as two riders trotted up the lane. They reined in, two raw-boned punchers in their middle twenties.

"I'm Darby," the taller one said. "This is my partner, Curt. If one of you's Mike Sullivan, we heard in town that you're hiring."

Mike nodded. "You men from around here?"

"South," Darby said. "We were drifting Colorado way, but right now we can use a riding job."

Mike turned to speak to Tim while Jess watched the riders. He had commanded men, and he knew them. He now had the sudden feeling that these two were not what they seemed. He heard Mike saying, "All right. Forty and found, and there won't be much riding to the job. You boys have your supper?"

"Ate in town," Curt drawled.

"Then we'll get going," Mike who had been holding the reins of his horse, mounted. "I'll try and be back before dark," he said, and reined out ahead of the men.

Tim stared after them. "Speak of the devil," he said, and turned to the house.

Jess followed slowly. "You ever see those two before, Tim?"

Tim turned on the porch. "No, can't say that I have. And I know about every lone puncher in these parts. Why?"

"It just seemed damn funny to me that they should come along at the right time."

"Meaning "

"Meaning they could be working for Kendel."

Tim was silent a moment. Then he said, "Let's eat on it. Mike'll be back by the

time we finish supper. We'll see then what he has to say."

Jess voiced his suspicions again when Mike returned, but the old Army sergeant was dubious.

"They struck me as a couple of regulars, Jess," he said. "The oldest one, Darby, was in the war. Fought in some of the same battles you and I took part in. Those boys are all right."

But in the bunkhouse that night, Jess was restless. When you commanded troops you learned to take one look at a man and read his worth. You learned to spot the "sunshine" soldier, the coward, the man who would stand up in time of trouble. But there were some who were hard to read, who kept their true selves hidden behind the masks of their faces, and Darby and Curt were like that. They had ridden up as if certain that jobs awaited them, and their lean hard faces had shown nothing when Mike hired them.

Jess rose softly, so as not to awaken Vince, and pulled on his jeans and boots. Ten minutes later, he had saddled a mount and was riding away from the ranch.

He brush-tied his horse a good five hundred yards from the entrance to the basin, and went ahead on foot. He smelled smoke before he gained a vantage point behind a tumble of boulders. It came from a small fire behind the barbed wire fence. A man lay there smoking a cigarette, his head on a saddle. Jess recognized him as Curt. A moment later, Darby came strolling along the fence and hunkered down by the fire, his lean body throwing a long shadow.

You were wrong, soldier, Jess told himself. He watched them a moment longer, thinking that if Kendel meant to scatter the herd he would not attempt it until possibly the night before Jameson was due to arrive, when there would not be time to round the horses up.

He had started back for his mount when he heard the thudding of trotting hoofs. Quickly he returned to his vantage point and saw the rider swing down near the fire. Darby and Curt walked to meet the man. Jess saw he was Buck Hawkins.

The three men talked together for a few minutes before Buck mounted and rode away up the meadow slope. Then Darby and Curt returned to the fire. Buck was checking, Jess thought. There won't be anything doing tonight. It's my guess

that they'll wait until the last minute.

He returned to his horse and rode back to the ranch.

AT BREAKFAST next morning, Jess told what he had learned. Mike rose from the table at once, his eyes blazing, and looked out the window. "They're due in. I'll have a word with them," he said grimly.

"Hold it, Mike," Jess said. "Where's your sense of strategy? Once Kendel realizes that we're on to him, he'll try something else. How long before Jameson is due?"

Mike glanced at the calendar on the wall. "Next Wednesday," he grumbled. "What are your thoughts on this, lad?"

"That Kendel will make his move Tuesday night. Put yourself in his place and see if I'm not right. If he scatters the herd Tuesday night, it would take a week to round them up, and by that time all the good would be run out of them."

Vince, the stubby, bowlegged cowboy, nodded agreement. "And we'd never round them all up, not in those mountains."

Tim was dubious. "So you think we ought to keep those two on?"

"I do," Jess said. He smiled thinly. "If at all possible, lull the enemy into thinking that he has the advantage. Mike, how many men can Kendel raise?"

Mike thought for a moment. "I'd say he has twenty men on his payroll. That's counting those that work in his saloon. But he can likely raise more."

"And there are four of us. We'll need more men for the showdown, Mike. Can you contact your cattlemen friends and have them ride in for a meeting? But it'll have to be done on the quiet. Once Kendel gets wind that something is up, he's liable to make his move right away."

"Aye, lad, I can do that. We can meet here tomorrow night, and none'll be the wiser."

Jess rose. "Then that's it. I've got the makings of a plan, and I'll be thinking it over before the meeting." He added slowly, "And it'd be a good idea after this for one of us to stand guard at the basin during the day."

"I reckon," Mike said, and nodded. "And you're elected today, lad. The cattle outfits are spread thin, and it'll take both

Tim and me to get around to them. And Vince will have to finish breaking the last of the stage horses to harness."

"Then it's time I got going," Jess said.

He met Darby and Curt on the way to the basin. The two riders reined in and nodded.

"Anything doing?" Jess said casually.

Darby turned his head and spat. "Not a thing." He looked at Jess with expressionless eyes. "You heading that way?"

Jess nodded. "Well, you boys better eat and get some sleep. Miss Sullivan has breakfast on the fire." He lifted a hand and rode on. . . .

He spent most of the forenoon inspecting the approach to the basin, and shaping his plan. Later he sat on a flat rock in the sunshine and drew a map. He was gazing thoughtfully at a few horses grazing near the barbed-wire fence when the flat crack of a rifle shot startled him. Something tugged at his hat.

Roaring with laughter, Buck Hawkins came trotting down the meadow slope from timber. He slid his rifle into its saddle boot. "I could've done better, drunk!" he called.

Jess rose and walked forward slowly, rage clawing at his insides. The horseman reined in, grinning widely, "Yeah, I could've done better—"

Jess reached up with both hands, gripped Buck's thick cartridge belt and jerked him from leather. Falling, a startled look rippled across the big man's face. He had not expected this.

Fists clenched, Jess stepped back. Buck hit the ground shoulder first. He scrambled to his feet, raging, and Jess leaped in and smashed a straight right to the face, hooked a left deep into Buck's body. The big man staggered, and Jess followed his advantage with three quick hammer blows to the face.

He stepped back again, saying quietly, "Let's get at it."

BUCK wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, looked at the blood and charged head low, thick arms swinging. Jess swung a fist from his boots, aware of a savage delight at the audible crack of his knuckles against Buck's temple. He had worked the poison out of his system and was fit again, and now all he felt was the need to wipe out the contempt this

man had shown him.

But Buck Hawkins was big and heavy, and he had the memory of their first encounter to back him. He was Kendel's right-hand man, and as such had taken respect for granted. He was a man who had handled others with no thought of resistance, and now he bulled into Jess with the raging arrogance of one who knows he will win out in the end.

He struck hard, staggering Jess, and leaped in to grasp him in his thick arms. And Jess let him come, then smashed him a stunning blow behind the ear. Buck plunged to his knees, staying there for a moment and shaking his head before leaping up. Jess met the charge, catching him with a looping right that forced Buck to step back. Jess went after him, slugging him in the face and body, giving him no rest and catching him finally with a hammer blow on the side of the jaw that sent Buck sprawling into the dust.

Then he stood there, hearing the saw of his own breathing. He lowered his head and planted his feet wide apart. When he raised his eyes it was to see Buck rolling over and reaching for his waist gun, clearing it of leather and lifting it, a vicious look on his battered face.

Everything spun inside Jess. He braced himself for the bullet. The crack of the shot came and Buck yelled with hurt rage and clutched the wrist of his gun hand, which no longer held the gun.

"Get his gun, Jess."

It was ten feet from Buck, who was sitting up, still gripping his wrist, the fist bloody where the bullet had creased it. Jess picked the gun up and looked at Ann. "My God!" he said.

"I've been watching." She held his rifle. "You should have kept this with you."

"I had it leaning against the rock."

Her face was hard and touched with gray around the set mouth, and anger smoldered in her eyes. He took the rifle from her gently. "Get going," he told Buck.

They watched in silence as Buck caught his mount and swung into leather. Then Buck spat a stream of blood and said, "Next time there won't be a woman to save your skin." He reined his horse in a tight turn and rode up the meadow slope at a gallop.

"Well—" Jess turned to Ann. She was

pale now, and shaken, and she sank down where she stood and rubbed her eyes. Hardly knowing that he did so, Jess reached down and stroked her hair. "It's all right."

"I brought a lunch," she said dully. "Then I saw you fighting. Neither of you heard me when I came up."

"It was a good thing I left the rifle where I did. He'd have killed me."

"I know it. He'll try again."

"I'll be ready for him."

She rose slowly, giving him an embarrassed sidewise smile. "Silly of me," she murmured. A little color came back to her cheeks. She touched her hair and glanced at him again from under her eyelids. "I—left the lunch basket up there behind some rocks. My horse is—" She made a gesture.

"I'll get him."

But he hesitated, feeling awkward. He leaned the rifle against the rock, and when he straightened she was right there and his arms went out to her at once. His heart swelled as her face pressed against his chest.

"You beat him," she whispered. "You had him whipped."

She raised her face slowly, her cheeks pink, and he bent down and put his mouth against hers.

After a while she said shakily, "You'd better go after my horse."

NOW all that needed to be done had been done. The meeting had been held, the plan outlined, and seven cattlemen and five of their riders had nodded agreement.

It had been dark for two hours and from behind the boulder Jess could see the small fire beside which Darby and Curt hunkered, their rifles and sixguns empty of shells. Those two had started to ride out to their post as usual this Tuesday evening, when Jess and the Sullivan brothers had stopped them.

"You two will do as you've been doing," Mike had told them grimly. "But there's one thing you'd better remember—there'll be sixteen guns trained on you. One wrong move from either of you and you'll never see Colorado."

Now the bait was in the open, the trap set.

But another hour passed before the

thudding of hoofs reached Jess. Then the first rider reined in near the fire. It was Kendel. Others followed. Jess recognized Buck Hawkins' bulk and noted that his right hand was bandaged.

Kendel dismounted, and Darby and Curt approached him. It was time. Jess stood tall, his voice rang clear and loud.

"Tell 'em, Darby! One move from any of you and it's the last one you'll make!"

For a startled moment the men on horseback froze at the words. And then the Sullivan brothers and the cattlemen and their riders, rose from behind boulders, out of brush from two sides, rifles and sixguns ready as they closed in on the trapped men.

Jess walked ahead of the rest. Something was wrong. He knew at once what it was. Kendel had only eight men with him. He looked straight at Kendel and said, "You've made your move and it ends here."

Firelight flickered across Kendel's clipped gray beard. His hand came to rest on the butt of his sixgun. His eyes narrowed. Without taking the gun from its holster, he pulled the trigger.

The shot made a hollow, reaching sound in the night.

Jed knew it then—a signal. Knew it before he heard distant shots from the north end of the basin. He swore at himself, at his stupidity. Kendel had posted half his men north to drive the herd through this entrance.

Jess's men turned their heads at the shots, startled. And Kendel gave one sharp order and his mounted men galloped in all directions. A rifle cracked and a rider pitched from his mount. Men shouted. Kendel made a run for the nearest rocks and vanished.

Jess made himself heard above the rest.

"Stop that herd! Shoot the leaders if you have to, but stop those horses!"

The mounted men who'd come with Kendel, hidden in darkness now, were firing on the cattlemen. Jess shouted, "Take cover!"

Now they were the ones who were trapped. Trapped between the panic-driven herd and Kendel's men. Already Jess heard the thunder sound of a thousand hoofs.

He hunkered down as the lead horse came in sight and put a bullet through its

head, watched it stumble, fall and roll to crash up against the barbed wire fence. A dozen followed, screaming, wild-eyed as hides tore on barbs. Piercing yells and continuous fire drove them forward.

Firing without pause, the cattlemen stopped the herd, turned it. The horses milled. Jess rose as Mike came over. "Well, we saved them."

"That we did, lad. But Buck and Kendel got away. And I'm afraid this isn't the end of it."

MAJOR JAMESON arrived next day.

Jess was in the yard when the major drove up in a rented buggy. Jess stared and turned slowly. Janice stepped down, followed by Lieutenant Martin. Major Jameson, tall and stiffly erect, approached Mike Sullivan and spoke to him. Jess went over.

Lieutenant Martin saw him first, and a grin widened his mouth. "Jess—"

Jess stiffened. The young lieutenant was one who'd scorned him at the trial, and after. He said nothing, nor did he look at Janice.

"Jess—" It was Martin. "It's good to see you!"

Jess shook the lieutenant's hand, wordless. Major Jameson turned at his approach and Janice smiled.

"Well, Jess—" The major offered his hand. "I heard you were here." His eyes were stern. "You'll be glad to know that sergeant Burgeson is with us again. He was badly wounded, but managed to escape his captors." The major cleared his throat. "He backed your story to the last detail."

A wild hope rose in Jess, and just as suddenly became still. "I'm glad to hear Burgeson got back. He's a good man. But I could never realize why I needed someone to back my story."

The major looked uncomfortable. Janice came and put her arm through his, and smiled up at him. She was a blue-eyed blonde. "Jess, you're looking wonderful. It's the first time I've ever seen you out of uniform."

Jess grunted. This sudden reversal baffled him. He saw Ann come from the house, her face oddly set as she looked at Janice.

Major Jameson said, "We've talked it over at the fort. There's a chance that the

decision of the court will be reversed." He turned to Mike. "Shall we look at those horses?"

It was hard for Jess to realize that the road back to the Army was open to him.

At the basin, the major said, "Fine, fine. Mike, you have made a sale, I believe. But don't take my word on that. I promised Kendel to look over his horses."

Janice monopolized Jess the rest of the day. "Isn't it wonderful? Jess, if the court reverses its decision I'm certain the charge will be stricken from your record."

She was taking a lot for granted, Jess thought. That evening, when major Jameson returned, he looked sternly at Mike.

"I understand you've had a little trouble here, Mike."

Mike, blunt and direct, told what had happened. The major smiled.

"A little war, eh? Well, I've looked over Kendel's herd and the contract is yours." He smiled and turned to his daughter. "We'd better return to our hotel."

Lieutenant Martin came quickly to her side. "Janice—"

She cast a glance at Jess, a hopeful glance that said more than words. Then she looked at Ann, her face suddenly stiff. She put a hand on Jess's arm. "Come to town with us."

"All right."

As they passed through the lamp-lighted doorway, there was a shot. Janice cried out. The major, his face startled, said, "What—"

Buck, Jess thought at once. He had seen the flash of the gun and cut wide to intercept. Buck fired once again at his shadow, and then Jess was upon him. Enraged he leaped at the big man. In that moment of decision, Buck knew he had lost.

"Enough," he gasped, staring up at Jess.

"Get out of here," Jess said in a low voice. "And get out of the country."

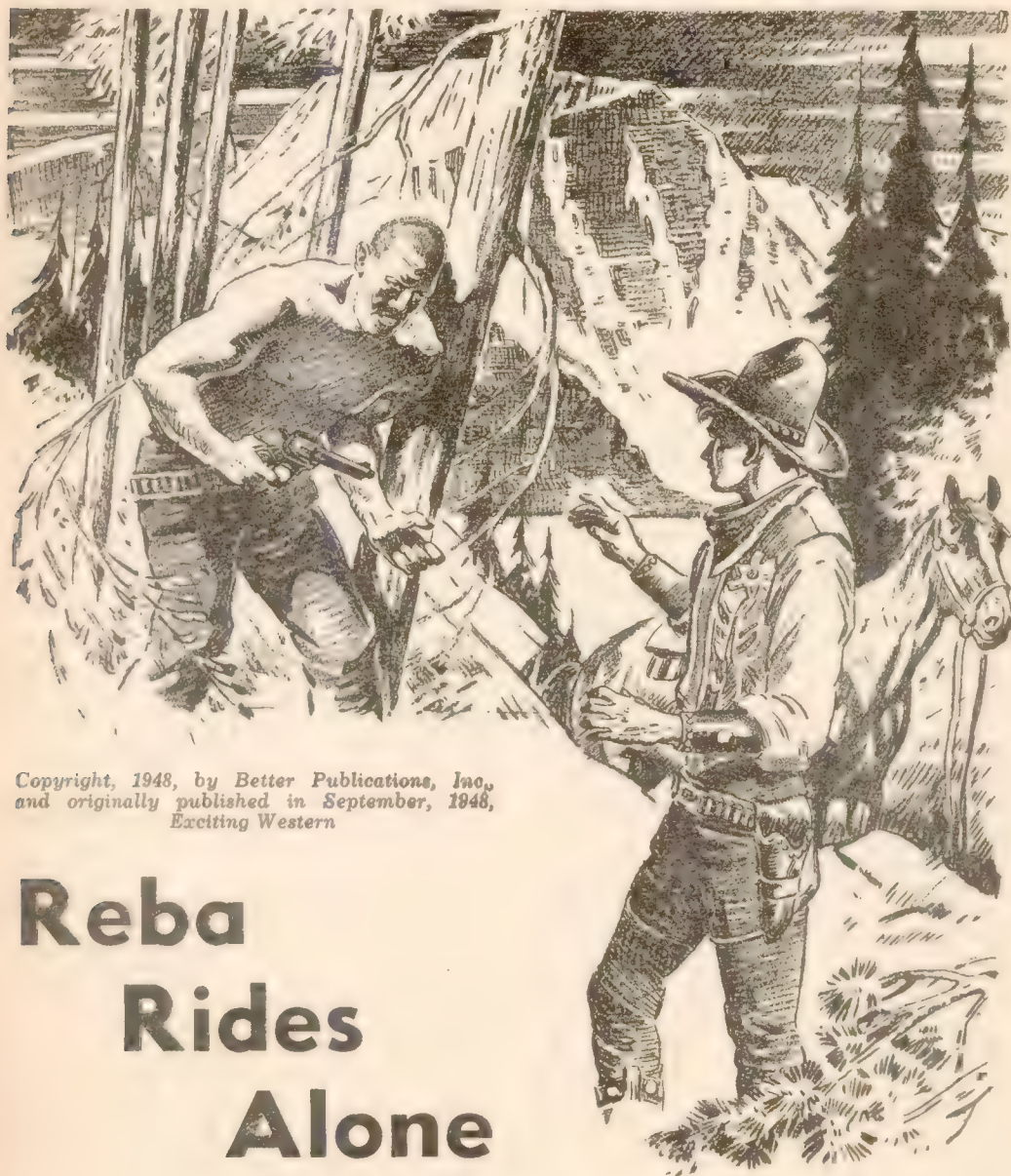
Buck vanished into the darkness. Jess returned to the house, thinking, what have I to do with them?

He looked at Ann and smiled. He touched Janice's arm, shook hands with the lieutenant and the major.

"Good night, sir," he said. "I will see you all again when we deliver the herd."

He turned to Ann. At her smile he took her arm. "Yes," he said, and felt a desire to laugh. "Yes," he said again, and both knew he was speaking of their future now.

A dying outlaw makes a strange repayment to a young owlhooter



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Reba Rides Alone

By D. B. NEWTON

HE WAS only a youngster, really, but he had ridden hard and far, and black thoughts had ridden with him. Gaunted, grimy cheeks were clouded with day-old blond beard stubble that

made a rasping sound as he scraped the knuckles of one hand across them and waited for his lathered bronc to drink. Utter weariness showed in every line of man and mount.

The horse, a stockinged sorrel, wanted to thrust its muzzle eye-deep into the refreshing coolness of this purling mountain stream, but the rider held it back. He had slipped the bit, loosened the cinches, and run his hand up under the sweaty blanket. Now, though his own throat felt lined with cotton and powdered dust, he held off long enough to study his surroundings out of tired, aching eyes.

Mountain alder and aspen, golden from the first frosts, twinkled their leaves under an arching blue dome of sky. A spruce slope stretched below, and behind him a whitecap reared above the needle-littered trail. Wild, deserted country. The Harronville posse was still an hour on the backtrail, a narrow margin of time but enough to work with.

As soon as his horse had rested a moment, he would tighten the latigos and swing up through the bed of this rippling current, not downstream as the posse would probably expect him to do. A shining outcrop of granite marked a place where he could quit the water without leaving tracks. After that—north in a wide loop across the ridges, and by nightfall he would be all right.

That is to say, he'd have his liberty. Further than that, there was no pleasure in considering.

The cry of a camp robber, off somewhere among the pines, began and died. He heeled around sharply, watching for the flash of blue through the tree heads while his right hand flicked hastily toward his holstered gun. But though he waited, crouched there beside his horse, no other sound came. Finally he straightened, forcing the tension out of him but feeling a little shaky from his scare.

"Shucks," the young man whispered into the stillness. "You've got to get control of yourself. From now on, anything that makes a noise could be waiting to jump."

THE sorrel had finished drinking. The man dropped the reins, moved upstream a few feet and, at the very edge of the water, squatted down on the heels of his worn, brush-scratched Justins. He began drinking out of his cupped hands, dipping up the water and gulping it eagerly between cracked and bearded lips.

The cool water ran down his bony wrists, down the front of his sweat-caked shirt.

A voice said, "All right, mister. Don't try anything. I want that sorrel."

A more experienced man might have known he was caught dead to rights, with no sane chance of making a play, but desperation had this youngster at hair-spring tension.

At the first sound of the words, his control snapped. He came around, gun-hand whipping back while his glance sought wildly to locate the speaker. He caught just a glimpse of a face, of sun glinting on a revolver barrel.

Then, in that awkward position, his boot heel slipped on the muddy edge of the creek, and the next moment he was going in with a splash of silvery water. His finger crimped the trigger of the gun that had barely cleared leather when he fell.

The creek closed over his head momentarily, ran cold into his nose and open mouth. He thrashed wildly. Then he was clawing at the grass on the bank, and powdersmoke hung in a thick cloud about him. His gun has driven its bullet straight into the muddy bank, ripping a deep hole there.

He got his elbows and upper body flopped over onto the land and tried to bring his gun level on the spot where he had seen that face. But there was nothing but the pine trunks, the green cloud of brush.

For a moment he clung there, coughing and panting, his legs in the creek and water streaming down into his face from plastered-down hair. Suddenly he saw the man—a huddled shape, sprawled face-down in the slick carpet of pine needles.

Because he knew he hadn't shot him, the young man could only stare at first in dull wonderment. But after that he came clambering out of the water, keeping his gun ready. Dripping wet, he paced forward warily until he was standing directly above the huddled figure, and could see the smear of a blood-drenched shirt.

An exclamation broke from him as he reached up to paw dripping hair out of his eyes.

Just plain passed out he thought. Looks like he's in a right bad way, too.

The gun lay inches from where a limp,

blunt-fingered hand had let it spill. As a precaution, the young fellow hooked it with a boot toe, kicked it aside. Then, his own gun still clamped in a hard grip, he leaned for a hold on a downed man's shoulder, heaved him over face-up.

He was heavy—a big-bodied man, with a face that was bearded and brutish. The flat nose had been broken in some rough-and-tumble fight of long ago. The hair was blue-black, close-cropped to the bullet-shaped skull. And a knife scar glistened silver in the sun. The young man knew that face. He stared, wide-eyed, and a name escaped his cracked lips.

"Mike Reba!"

Not dead—no. But not far from it, judging from the amount of blood the man had lost. No one could stand to have it drained from him like that indefinitely. The young man straightened slowly. He looked at his horse and at the backtrail and then up the rippling course of the stream toward those higher hills. He could not spare any more time; he ought to be in the saddle, even if it meant leaving this hurt man to die.

But Mike Reba! Suddenly to the fugitive it seemed that a rare opportunity had fallen into his hands if he could make use of it. And, his mind made up, he hesitated no longer.

FIRST he went for his sorrel and led it back into the aspen clump where he tied it in leaf-shadow. A buzzing of flies caught his ear, drew him farther into the brush. There he saw the dead roan, stiff and cold, and the hole the bullet had made in its skull. The roan's foreleg was broken.

"Lost his own bronc and waylaid me for mine!" the blond man grunted. "For that I ought to let him die."

Yet he returned to Mike Reba's prone shape and, with mouth tight from distaste, pulled off the bloody rag of a shirt. It was a messy thing. He knew little about gunshot wounds but he judged that the bullet had struck Reba in the side, followed a rib around toward his spine.

A groan from the hurt man jerked his head up. Mike Reba was staring at him from bloodshot, pain-bright eyes.

"Kid"—the word was a hoarse, gasping grunt—"in my pocket—a knife. Cut the bullet out of me!"

"No!" The young man flinched back, horror-stricken.

The hurt man's big hand lifted feebly, tried to grab his arm. "Please! You've got to. It's pressing against the spine. I—can't stand it! The pain—"

"But I can't!"

Sweat was on the kid's face. Nausea swept over him. He looked down at his hands. They trembled at the horror of the thing he had been asked to do. But then his jaw clamped, his bearded mouth set hard. He reached, fumbled in the hurt man's pocket and closed his fingers over the horn handle of the knife.

When he was finished, Mike Reba lay gasping, hardly conscious, his smoky eyes rolled back until the whites showed. Shakily the youth stabbed the blood-stained knife blade into the dirt to clean it, snapped it shut. He ran a sleeve across his face to wipe away the sweat that trickled down into the beard stubble.

Getting to his feet, he moved dazedly down to the creek and washed the blood from his hands. A leg muscle had cramped under him. He limped as he came back, carrying Mike Reba's hat filled with water.

He sloshed some onto the hurt man's face and, as Reba began to rouse, squatted and, supporting him with a hand behind his head, helped Reba to drink. After that, he got out tobacco and rolled a smoke for himself and one for the wounded man.

"Thanks," muttered Reba weakly, puffing at the cigarette. "A nasty job, but I feel better already. I owe you a lot."

"Yeah, you do," grunted the other harshly. "Needn't think I went to all this trouble for nothing, Reba."

The bloodshot eyes narrowed. "You know me?"

"It's the only reason I bothered."

Thick lids veiled the burning stare of the other man's eyes. "You wasted your time, then," he muttered. "I don't reckon I'm pulling out of this one. Lost too much blood. I've packed that bullet fifty miles or more. A gent that didn't like me and figured the same way you're doing—" The bloodless lips twisted. "Kid, you forgotten the reward is good either way—dead or alive?"

Color edged into the younger man's face. "I ain't after no money reward," he

snapped. "Wouldn't be in no position to cash in on one, anyhow. It happens I'm on the dodge, too."

The outlaw scowled. "So? Then what do you want with me?"

"I want to join up with you."

Genuine surprise showed in the pain-tight face. He shook his head. "No! You can forget it, kid. Mike Reba always rides alone. I certainly ain't taking on no slick-ear like you for a pardner."

"I'm joining up with you," the young man repeated, and his jaw was hard. "Once I pull you through this—"

Mike Reba didn't answer that. He lifted a hand, jerked the cigarette from his mouth and snuffed it out in the dirt.

"So you're going on the owlhoot?" he grunted sourly. "Your first job, I reckon. Who are you, kid?"

THE young man's voice sounded clipped, tight. "The name is Dave Wall. I killed a man down at Harronville. A crook named Stebbins. He had it coming, though I didn't mean to plug him. He went for his gun."

"What was it? A stickup?"

"Yes. This Stebbins gent sold me a ranch he didn't own. By the time I'd found out the deed was a fake he had cleared out with my money. I trailed him, caught up with him at Harronville."

"Get your money back?"

"There wasn't any chance, not when the shooting started. I had to clear out, with a posse after me. They're still somewhere down the trail."

Mike Reba gave a snort of disgust. "I suppose there were even witnesses!"

"No!" exclaimed Dave Wall hotly. "I'm not that stupid. Not a soul in Harronville so much as laid eyes on me. But they spotted my horse."

Reba gave him a shrewd glance. "If nobody seen you, then you're in the clear. Don't be a fool, kid. Lie low till your chance comes, then drift back where you come from. Go back to punching cows or whatever you was doing."

"No, thanks. I ain't going through again what I did to get the money that crook stole from me." Bitterness edged the youngster's voice. "There was a girl. She waited five years while I broke my back earning a stake. She ain't going to wait another five."

"She say so?"

"I never asked her. I'm never going near her again—not empty-handed." Dave Wall's face twisted angrily. "That wolf, Stebbins, was a respected agent in Harronville. If it's all right for him, it ought to be all right for me. I'm on the backtrails now and I'm going to stay there till I've got the dinero I need and I'm ready to turn back."

A sneer touched the outlaw's mouth. "Big talk! And easy to make. It all looks pretty simple, I guess, to a young pup like you."

"Look here! I don't take that kind of talk, even from you, Reba." Dave Wall's edgy nerves drew him up, one fist clenching as though he would take a swipe at the other man. But he checked himself and when he spoke again, it was in a lower voice. "I never said it was easy. I know it ain't. That's why I aim to tie up with you, with a gent that knows the ropes."

"And I don't think you can put me off. You're helpless—no bronc, a bad hole in you that's still bleeding. But my sorrel is here. I'll get you on him and keep you there if I have to tie you. We'll shake the posse that's after me, and when you can get around again, you're going to show your gratitude by teaching me the things I need to know. It that plain?"

Mike Reba began to curse. "I don't want to saddle myself with a whelp like you and a fool to boot." He shrugged. "But you got the gun and you're calling the cards, so there's nothing I can do about it. Can't even make you let me lie here and die in peace."

"You ain't going to die," snapped Dave Wall. He got to his feet. "Come on, now, and no argument. We're getting out of here before that bunch of manhunters from Harronville overtakes us."

The scar glistened as Reba lifted his head, scowling. "Well, give me a hand, then," he snarled suddenly. "If that's how it's to be. You got to help me up from here. I'm weak as hell."

Dave Wall had him by an arm, trying to hoist the outlaw's solid weight. Suddenly Reba slewed around, falling heavily against the young man's legs, and Wall felt the sixgun slipping from his holster. He leaped back with a cry.

"That's better," said Mike Reba, glar-

ing at Dave Wall over the muzzle of the gun he had captured. "Now just keep back if you don't want a slug through you. Looks like this is the way we started, don't it? I got the gun—and the bronc, too, as soon as I'm ready to ride."

SHAKEN and surprised, Wall crouched there, facing the outlaw who sat with the weapon leveled. "You tricked me."

"Couldn't have been simpler, either. Shucks, you ain't got brains enough to be my pardner. I told you Mike Reba always rides alone."

But the exertion seemed to have drained the strength from the outlaw's bullet-blasted body. He was suddenly gasping for breath, his huge torso laboring. The fist that held the weapon dropped to his thigh and propped there.

"I got to—rest a minute—before I can ride," he panted. "You! Move over there and—set where I can—watch you. And keep away from that gun lying on the grass."

Dave Wall stood where he was, consternation mounting in him. "No!" he cried. "If you're going to take my gun and my horse, then you've got to let me go—give me a chance to get away on foot."

"No." Reba shook his head from side to side. "I can't trust you, kid. I'm keeping you in sight until I'm in saddle and plumb ready to ride."

"But I helped you, Reba. And now you'd hold me here until it's too late for me to throw that Harroville crowd off my trail. Ain't you got a speck of—"

His voice trailed off, for he saw suddenly that Mike Reba's eyes were closed. The hurt man's breathing had a tortured rasp in it now, and the blood was trickling from that terrible gash in his side. He looked almost like a dying man. And, with tension leaping inside him, Dave Wall took a slow step forward, another, hand reaching for that other weapon that glinted in the pine needles.

"Cut it out!"

He jerked back as though stung. Reba's eyes were open again, watching him; the bloodless, broken-nosed features were tight, and so was the grip on the gun.

"I ain't dead yet—not while I got strength enough to snap this hammer.

[Turn page]

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Now, get back!"

Hopelessly, Dave Wall obeyed the menace of the gun. With Reba's wicked eyes watching him, he moved back, dropped to the ground and put his shoulders against an aspen bole. Sweat was streaming over his body, although his clothes were clammy and still wet and cold from his plunge into the water. A cold knot had tightened itself inside him. For the last time he tried to talk to this man whose trick had turned the tables.

"Listen to me—"

"Shut up!" snarled Mike Reba, tight lips barely moving.

Stillness came across the world, except for the ripple of the water close beside them, the swaying of tree heads, the rasp of the hurt man's labored breathing. Hopelessness engulfed young Wall. He had tried to do a favor, and because he had tried, the treachery of this owlhooter had doomed him.

All at once a sound came to him on the faint breeze of morning. Hoofbeats, pounding the trail, the jingle of harness and the call of a man's voice. He lurched to his feet, and again Mike Reba opened his eyes.

"It's them!" cried Dave Wall. "But they'll get you, too. You've lost your own neck as well as mine."

Reba cocked his ugly head as though listening. By now the sound of the posse was unmistakable, and coming closer by the moment.

He grunted, "Yeah, I guess I better be moving."

With painful slowness he got his knees under him and then, clinging to the tree trunk, pushed to his feet. He swayed there, a bloody figure, and he snapped hoarsely:

"Get the sorrel, kid. Bring him to me."

GROANING inwardly, Dave Wall turned away with that gun muzzle following him. The horses of the oncoming posse seemed to shake the ground with the beat of hooves now, to make the colored leaves of the aspens tremble on

the still air. He fumbled with the knot, led the sorrel to where Mike Reba waited.

"All right," said the outlaw, "step back."

When Wall was clear of the horse, Reba went toward it, tottering. The sorrel shied at the smell of blood, but Reba caught the horn and almost collapsed against the saddle. His knees sagged, dragging the kak heavily down on that side. He hung that way, sweat streaming down his ugly face.

"You'll never make it," Dave Wall gritted. "You'll never get into the saddle. You've thrown both our lives away."

On his last words, the riders came breaking through the trees. With a desperate sob Wall turned, made a dash and leaned to snag the gun that lay in the pine needles. He came up with it, determined that taking him would cost this crowd from Harronville dearly. He saw them all around him on their lathered bronses, saw the guns in their hands. Then he heard the shouts.

"It's Reba!"

And Mike Reba's hoarse challenge: "I gave you a long chase, didn't I? But it took a kid to stop me with a bullet."

The sorrel broke away from him then, terrorized by the shouts and the smell of blood. Reba dropped forward to his knees, but there was still life in him. Life enough to lift his bullethead with its spiking of short-cropped black hair, to grin hideously at that ring of possemen.

Reba said, "Remember, the kid here earned the reward. The whole five thousand. He looks like a youngster that could use some—honest money."

He crumpled forward onto his face, but not before his pain-shot glance crossed Dave Wall's with a kind of wicked humor in it. Staggered, Wall stood there with a gun in his hand, slowly comprehended a dying outlaw's strange and twisted way of repaying—and saving—the man who had risked himself to aid him.

And he knew that, whatever dim trail stretched before the outlaw now, Mike Reba would still be riding alone.

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A TINTYPE of SONORA



by **GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL**

DAVE MERRITT was walking beside his ox team, scratching at his young beard, when the shot rang sharp and clear from the trail ahead, echoing between the steep canyon walls. A moment later hoofs beat a rapid clatter on the trail ahead of him. Because of the black oak and tamarack pine foresting the gorge, he could not see the rider.

He whooped at his ox team and cracked his bull whip about their ears. They lunged ahead, but the effort lasted only a

*A photo can be useful in
time of trouble—
but sometimes it can be
compromising, too!*

pace or two. The van they pulled was heavy, the going upgrade, and young David Merritt did not punish the patient animals.

Finally rounding a turn in the road, he

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saw a frightened horse pulling on reins held within the bent arm of a man lying flat on the ground. Merritt ran forward and dropped to his knees beside the prostrate figure.

"You hurt, partner? What happened?"

The man did not answer. He was young and sturdily built, but grievously wounded. Pity shadowed Merritt's gray eyes as he recognized Warren Blalock, an express rider for Stoddard and Blaney, one of the several express companies which served the quarter-million gold-hunters the rush of '49 had lured to California. Blalock had passed Merritt's ox van but a few minutes before, shouting that he was hurrying to Sonora with express matter to stock out on the afternoon stage to Stockton.

"He'll never get to Sonora now," was Merritt's thought.

Blalock stirred and moaned. Merritt ran to his huge wagon, and came back with a bottle of whisky. He poured a bit between Blalock's white lips. Blalock choked, and a scarlet froth came to his lips. He looked at Dave Merritt.

"What happened?" Merritt asked. "Robbery?"

Blalock nodded. "I had a thousand ounces of gold dust in my saddle-bags."

"Who did it?"

"Just got a glimpse—as I fell," whispered the wounded man.

"Recognize him? What did he look like?"

Blalock tried to speak, but hadn't the strength. He shook his head. Then, whispering so faintly that Merritt had to bend close to hear, he said, "He was—riding—a white..."

That was all. Blalock did not speak again.

Merritt gathered up the body of the dead man. The express messenger was heavy, but for all his slight stature and wiry build, Dave had strength. He placed Blalock in the van. Then on toward Sonora he urged his ox team.

His thoughts were moody as he strode along beside his oxen. That gold dust stolen from the express messenger—at least a dozen men would suffer from the loss. It was wealth wrested out of the diggings, savings over and above what a man needed to live on in a country where a pair of gum boots cost a hundred dollars,

where a pill cost a dollar, and medicine a dollar a drop, where an egg cost three dollars—and just to have a letter brought to you from San Francisco cost two-fifty. It was gold dust started out to families in New England, Boston, New Orleans—families waiting long weary months for tardy word and tardy help from men-folk long-gone to the gold fields.

And now a killer-thief had taken that wealth.

Next morning, Dave halted his ox van in front of Joel Smith's blacksmith shop in Sonora.

Joel Smith, a burly, black-haired giant of a man, groaned aloud at the sight of him. Blacksmiths hated to shoe oxen. Merritt hated to be a nuisance, but his oxen's feet needed tending.

"Lawda-mighty, fellow, you must work them poor oxen like furies, they need shoeing so often!" Smith rumbled in a deep voice.

Merritt reddened slightly and a spark came into his gray eyes. He did not overwork his oxen. In fact both Pete and Repeat were fat and sleek, a lordly pair of matched brindles who took advantage of his good nature in a hundred different ways. The big blacksmith knew this, but it tickled him to pretend that the young "dag" artist was a brutal bull-whacker.

"Pete's lost a front shoe and Repeat's lost both hind left ones," Merritt informed.

"Oh, Lord!" Joel Smith groaned. "I'd rather shoe twin hurricanes. What's new, young feller?"

THE blacksmith was an important personage in the diggings, prominent in politics and civic life. The exaggerated deference with which big Joel Smith always treated Dave Merritt flattered the youngster, made him voluble—and a little ashamed afterwards, for being flattered at all. Talking now, he told Smith of the hold up and murder, while Smith got busy on the oxen.

The big blacksmith placed a rope around Pete's horns and drove the animal close to the ox rack. Then he poured buckets of water over the floor to make it slippery under the big ox's hoofs. Twisting a windlass, straining with all his giant strength, Smith pulled the beast into the ox cradle. It was a task, for the sullen ox balked with monumental obstinacy.

Veins standing out on his forehead, muscles knotted taut, Smith windlassed the ox into place.

"You brought Blalock's body in?" he then asked Merritt.

"To the express company's office," Merritt answered. "I went to report the matter to Sheriff Work, but he is out of town."

Smith passed a leather apron under the ox as a sling. Then, with aid of the windlass, he hauled the ox off his feet, dragging the animals front hoofs back to the rear, Smith chained each one to a block sunk into the floor. Then Smith dragged the hind hoofs backward and chained them down similarly. Dave, meanwhile, reassuringly patted the ox, for the animal did not once relax.

Smith started shoeing Pete. Each of the ox's hoofs required two shoes, one for each toe. Nailing them in place required a firm delicacy of touch. For the nails could enter only a quarter-inch into the hoof.

"Who do you reckon shot that express rider?" Smith asked.

"Don't know," Merritt said, almost adding that it had been a hombre riding a white horse.

But he left the words unuttered as he noticed a man riding hurriedly up the street on a white mount! A white mule. The man reined up in front of the blacksmith shop. Dave recognized him as Stuart Ransome, express messenger for Wells Fargo.

"Smith," Ransome called, "I got the latest newspapers. Just off the boat at Stockton!"

"Tell Doran to save one for me!" Joel Smith bawled.

On down the street the express rider lashed his mule. Dave Merritt gazed after him, troubled. Blalock, before he died, had whispered that his killer was a man riding a white—what? A white horse or a white mule? Blalock and Ransome rode for different express firms. There was rivalry between express riders, sure. But Ransome wouldn't rob and murder a rival express rider. Or would he?

Express riders brought millions of dollars' worth of gold dust from the diggings to be sent to San Francisco and the East. Was it to be wondered at if touch of the yellow wealth infected a man with a craze

to seize some of it for his own? Certainly, a lone express rider carrying gold from a score of diggings was more profitable prey than jumping one miner.

Smith had just finished shoeing the first ox, when there came an interruption. A young woman walked into the blacksmith shop. She was an excited girl with shining dark hair and dusky gray eyes, attired in a yellow silk dress with a high-fluted collar and gay flounces.

"Is there a Mr. J-Joel Smith here?" she stammered.

"Why, yes, miss." The big blacksmith looked at her and smiled. "That's me."

"Oh!" Her lovely eyes were shadowed with trouble as she looked at him, and spots of red burned in her cheeks. Aghast she stared at him, as if hardly daring to believe what she saw. "This is really awful—I mean, you are s-sure you're Mr. Joel Smith?"

"Am I sure!" the big blacksmith belowed. "Holy jumpin' beanstalks, what do you mean by that, young woman?"

He wasn't really offended; but the girl got terribly flustered, and a blush crimsoned her youthful throat and climbed to the roots of her shining dark hair.

"You see, I'm Judith Ransome."

"Stuart Ransome's sister?"

"Yes! And I'm so new here!"

"Running the book store and library on Union Street, ain't you?" inquired the big blacksmith.

SHE nodded. Then, as if taking her courage in both hands, she blurted out, "Something terrible has happened. I've got to beg you to forgive me."

"Why?"

The girl glanced appealingly at Dave Merritt, and he smiled to reassure her. "You see, ever since I landed in San Francisco on my way here it's been the same thing."

"I just don't get the cut of this, Miss."

"We don't understand, Miss Ransome," Merritt put it gently.

"Well, you see—" She was having a hard time getting it out. Her winsome blush deepened. And Dave's pulse raced. She was a lovely girl. She went on:

"It seems that there are so terribly few women in California! On the stagecoach, coming here, I sat next to the driver and—and on the way here, he asked me to

—marry him!”

Dave and the blacksmith just looked at her for the moment, not knowing how to take the matter.

“Then, the first day here, I started working in the book store. A big miner came in and plumped a perfectly huge poke of gold dust on the counter. He had red whiskers and a red flannel shirt that was sweaty and torn and he smelled of tobacco—and I’d never seen him before! He said, ‘There’s more dust where this come from. It’s all yours if you’ll marry me.’ But that’s not all! Days later while practising with the church choir, Mr. Hemphill, the school teacher, also asked me to marry him.”

The blacksmith could contain himself no longer. He threw his head back, smote his knee and guffawed in uproarious mirth. Even Merritt could not keep back a smile. But he sympathized with Judith Ransome, understanding what was back of her experience. It wasn’t that California men were just rough and crude, but that women were scarce here, and the men were lonely for them with a profound and restless hunger.

The first year of the gold rush, for instance, had brought twenty-five thousand men to San Francisco alone. It had brought on the other hand, but three hundred women, of whom only fifteen were of the church-going kind. Out in the diggings women were even scarcer. Miss Ransome smiled tremulously, too, but tears of vexation welled in her lovely eyes, and spiritedly she went on.

“So I had to do something about it! I just can’t have men popping the question at me as if it were a game of tag or something! Can I?”

She demanded it earnestly, vehemently, and Dave’s quick mind leaped to something behind her question. It was important; it was vital to her.

“Of course not,” he said heartily.

“So—I did it,” she said, and looked defiantly at them. “I mean I told people I was already engaged to be married. And I put on my mother’s old ring.”

“So?” prompted Smith in his booming voice.

“That’s what it’s all about! That’s what’s caused all the trouble!”

“How?” Merritt asked. “Maybe you better tell us what trouble!”

“Oh, of course! You see—my father’s name was Joel. And the name Smith just popped into my mind. So I told people I was engaged to a Mr. Joel Smith.”

The blacksmith gawked at her. “You what?” he bawled.

Her cheeks were fiery, her lovely eyes tortured with embarrassment. “I swear I never knew a man by that name existed! You must believe me. You’ve got to believe me!”

Joel Smith glared at her, but Dave saw that the burly blacksmith was having a hard time to keep from exploding into laughter again.

“Told people you were going to marry me, huh?”

“I wouldn’t have done it if I’d known,” she apologized. “I wouldn’t have done it for anything in the world! When I learned from old Mrs. Laird that there was a Joel Smith here in town—”

“Lawda-mighty!” Smith boomed. “You lived in this town four days before finding out Joel Smith lives in this town? And me running for alcalde next month! It ain’t reasonable.”

“Can’t you forgive me, Mr. Smith?” Judith pleaded.

He folded his thick arms across his huge chest and glowered at her, heavy brows knitted over his dark eyes.

“Young woman, you got any idea of what sort of a position you done got me into?”

“I’ll make amends! I’ll do whatever you say. I’ll write a letter to the paper, explaining everything.”

“And make a laughing stock of me! No! You’d ruin my career in politics!” he thundered at her.

Dave stepped toward her and took her arm as it looked as if she might collapse in a moment.

“Just one thing you can do,” Smith said ominously, bending toward her. “You’ve said you were engaged to marry me, hey? All right. It’s not of my choosing. The blame is yours. But the wrong has been done, and I’m not a man to dodge facts. You can marry me.”

She went deathly pale, stood there staring at him. Then abruptly her lovely eyes snapped and her blushing cheeks grew even more crimson with anger. Without another word she turned sharply on her heel and started away. The big black-

smith, unable to contain himself any longer, whooped and bellowed his laughter.

Judith Ransome would have walked smack into Pete, the ox, her eyes were so blinded with tears of mortification, if Dave hadn't caught her arm.

"Come here, Miss Ransome," he said gently. "I think I have a solution for your problem."

He led her over to his big van.

SHE saw that the wagon was a small house on wheels, brightly painted, the roof and wheels and running gear were of crimson, the walls of creamy yellow, windows and doors trimmed in azure, and the eaveline hemmed in a rococo design of sawn wood. In the roof was a sky-light of clear glass, which could be covered with canvas. And on each side of the van was painted in fancy lettering:

"Secure the shadow ere the substance fade;
Let nature copy that which nature made."

Dave let down the painted steps leading to the rear door of the van and helped Miss Ransome to enter. Inside, she blinked back her tears and stared around astonished.

"I am a daguerreotypist, Miss Ransome," Merritt explained.

"Oh, a dag artist!" she breathed, looking around at the exhibit on the van walls with quickened interest.

Pointing to skylight, he said, with professional modesty, "I execute likenesses in any weather. For beauty of finish, life-like appearance and artistic composition, my work is the equal of any in the West."

"I can believe that!" Her interest caught, she examined the pictures on the walls, gazed at his equipment with respect, eyed his "laboratory" and chemicals with rapt awe. A legend at the top of his case of daguerreo-types read:

Cheapest and best pictures in the state to send in letters to the friends back home.

Under the sign was a collection of scenic studies—of seashore, of mountains, of mining camp and placer bar, of stage-coach and pack mules and river steamers. "I've made up a fine collection of ambrotypes, to sell at fifty cents each," Merritt went on.

"How very reasonable!" she exclaimed,

somewhat puzzled.

"Yes, I think so," he said with an eager modesty which was becoming. "I believe that art should not be beyond the reach of anybody. Also, I've worked out a new process of making stereoscopes. Here," and he placed one in her hands.

"Oh, it's good. It's truly fine. I don't believe I've ever seen any dag work to equal yours."

His earnest young face glowed.

"Well, in a couple respects at least, no other daguerreotypist in California can equal my work. Look." He opened a big drawer under a table against one wall, revealing a display of watches, chains, rings, bracelets, ear-rings, necklaces. "You see, I have here a large selection of jewelry for clients to wear when sitting for portraits. It was all designed and executed in New York especially for me."

Judith Ransome caught her breath in appreciation. She was fascinated, dazzled.

"But I'm even more proud," Merritt went on, opening a cabinet, "of the great variety of dag cases and albums I can provide my customers. I can furnish a mounting suitable for any type of portrait, no matter how dignified, or—" he coughed a little self-consciously—"how lovely and winsome the subject."

Judith colored slightly. Her long lashes veiled her eyes, but a smile lurked in the corners of her sweet lips, and she examined the handsome picture cases with appreciation. Some were of fine morocco leather with silver clasps, and a narrow banding of filigree silver to protect the edges. Some were of velvet, the color of the African violet, with delicately worked silver leaves for rests. Some had outside corners decorated with exquisite Italian mosaics, and album leaves ornamented with lines of gold.

"They're beautiful!" Judith breathed. "We should have some in the book shop."

Dave cleared his throat tactfully as he picked up one portrait case.

"Miss Ransome, you have a—difficulty," he began, and went on quickly as the hot blush returned to her lovely face and quick concern again shadowed her eyes. "You have told people that you were engaged to a Mr. Joel Smith. Well—here is proof of it!"

She stared at him, startled, not understanding.

"Don't you see?" he said. "Place this portrait in your book shop! When people come in, just explain that this is a portrait of the Joel Smith you are going to marry!"

"Oh! I'd say that this is my Joel Smith!"

"Exactly. Of course, you'd say that he's back East as yet, but next spring . . ."

FOR a moment or two the girl held the picture in her hands, looking at it.

"I do believe that would work," she thought aloud, studying the picture. It was a portrait of a serious, pleasant-faced young man about twenty, in high-buttoned broadcloth coat and a wide-pointed collar that was dwarfed by the giant knot of a very dignified scarf. Unlike men in the West, among whom mustache and beard were well-nigh universal, he was clean-shaven, though, long poetic sideburns came below the lobes of his ears.

"He looks like a very genteel person," Judith said demurely.

"Just a sample portrait from my New York jobber. Don't even know where or who the man is. So it will solve your problem, Miss Ransome."

"I really think it will! I must pay you for it."

"No! I would be honored if you would accept it as a gift."

She looked right at him, and a snap and crackle began to come into her lovely eyes. "I will pay for it, Mr. Merritt," she insisted.

"Fifty cents," he mumbled, reddening. "Same as the other scenic studies."

Very gravely she counted out the change.

He was staring after her as she left, so intent that he didn't notice the approaching rider who reined up in front of the smithy.

"Hey, Joel!" the newcomer bawled. "Man name of Merritt been here? Word was left at my office."

"Yeah. There he is. Hey, Merritt! Here's Sheriff Work."

Dave looked around. And he felt a quick relief as he saw the burly, gray-haired man with the badge on his vest. Now he could tell all he knew about the murder and robbery of the express company's messenger and have that responsibility off his mind.

"Sheriff," he began eagerly, starting

forward, "I was traveling up the—" Words choked in his throat; he rooted in his tracks and gawked.

Sheriff Work was mounted on a white horse.

Recovering, Merritt told Sheriff Work the whole story in the undisturbed quiet of the van, including what the dying express rider had said about the killer riding a white mount.

"That ain't a lot of help," the over-worked sheriff grumbled, pulling at his lower lip. "There's a dozen white horses in the district. Why, even I ride a white horse!"

"Yes," said Dave tersely.

The sheriff looked at him, and then frowned suddenly. But Merritt's face was guarded.

At supper time, Dave stopped in at the Sonora Book Store. Judith Ransome gravely waited on him. He bought a copy of Harper's only three months old. But he had no chance for any talk with the girl. The store was busy. It was amazing how many horny-handed miners wanted copies of the Frank Leslie's Ladies Magazine and the British Quarterly Review.

Standing on a bookcase was that handsome portrait of "Joel Smith." Repeatedly men asked Judith about the picture, and repeatedly she answered, "My intended," with a flush of happy embarrassment that gave a glow of loveliness to her fresh young face. Dave sighed, and walked out.

He found business good in Sonora during the next few days.

Miners were eager to send home pictures of themselves in red flannel shirts and high boots and whiskers, a pistol sagging at their belts, and a Bowie knife stuck in their boot, to show the boys on the farm and at the lodge what hell-roarin' Argonauts they were. Miners who had just found huge nuggets wanted the same recorded for family and posterity. Mining companies building flumes to bring water to dry diggings wanted pictures of impounding dam and high trestles. Miners leaving for home with pokes of gold wanted pictures of the spots where they had struck it rich.

Dave was hitching up his oxen one morning for a trip to Grayback Bar when a rider came galloping into Sonora on a lathered horse and reined up in front of the sheriff's office.

By the time Dave was hitched up, Sonora was in commotion.

"Another express messenger killed and robbed!" a man yelled to the daguerreotypist as he ran past. "Sheriff Work's raisin' a posse!"

"Who was the express messenger?" Dave yelled.

But the man had turned into a store and didn't hear.

Dave whooped his oxen into motion and started down Washington Street. A score of riders passed him, horses' hoofs pounding up a cloud of dust as they headed out of town.

"Oh, Mr. Merritt!"

HE HALTED his team as he saw Judith Ransome come running across the road toward him. She stumbled and would have fallen if he had not caught her, for she was blinded with tears. Lips quivering, she gasped out:

"It's my brother, Stuart! Someone shot and robbed him. He's at Twin Bar camp, and he's so badly hurt they are afraid to move him! It's just three miles, but the possemen have taken all the horses in town—"

"I'll take you there!" Dave offered quickly.

For the first time, Dave inwardly cursed his oxen and wished they were horses or mules. They were so infernally slow, plodding along and chewing their cud with a maddening deliberation. He shouted at them, lashed them, but after a couple of paces of trotting they would slacken again to a shuffling walk. The gaudy van was scarcely out of Sonora ere half a dozen more possemen rode past.

"It's the second such robbery this month," Merritt remarked gravely. "Looks as if the whole district is rising up to put a stop to it."

He scratched reflectively at the light, tawny beard on his chin.

Judith had stifled her tears, but now they welled up anew, and Merritt put his arm in brotherly fashion about her shoulders. She leaned against him, letting her grief ease itself in weeping.

It was thus that Merritt did not notice the little band of riders who rode out of a thicket onto the trail, took one look at the brightly painted van, and rode back into the thicket to dismount. The young

photographer was brought to sharp awareness of his surroundings by the sudden roar of a six-shooter and the whisper of a bullet across the road above the backs of his oxen.

Dave Merritt started and looked around. There to one side, in a semi-crouch, booted and spurred, a pair of six-shooters in his big hands, was Joel Smith, Sonora's blacksmith. Behind him was an ugly-faced stranger, also in riding garb. Peering out from the brush warily as they came forward, were two more men.

"Hello there, young 'uns!" boomed Joel Smith in his bass voice. "Any more word from Twin Bar?"

"No," replied Merritt, his eyes mirroring his surprise and uneasiness. "We are heading there now so Miss Ransome can be with her brother."

"No, you ain't," contradicted the transformed blacksmith, his voice going hard and grating. "I'll kill you deader than buzzard meat if you make one move I don't like! Is that talk you can savvy, or have I got to shoot you to convince you?"

Judith gasped and cowered back against Merritt.

"What's the matter with you, Joel? What do you want?" Merritt asked.

"A ride," snarled the man with the drawn six-shooters. "Tim, you and Casey get inside the van. Mike, you're the least known hereabouts, so you'll have to take the horses and head south for Chinese Run. Likely the posse'll gang up on you and follow. When they finally sight you, ride for your life. Better get astraddle my palomino. He can outrun anything in the country."

Joel Smith and two of his men climbed into the van after the fourth hombre rode off on the palomino. Dave Merritt stared after the palomino. It was a magnificent horse—a white mane and tail that flowed like silken banners in the wind.

And in Dave's mind ran those words that Blalock had whispered when dying. "He was ridin' a white—"

The express messenger had been trying to say that his killer had been riding a white-maned horse!

"You shot Blalock!" Dave choked out, staring back at Joel Smith.

"Damn it!" the big blacksmith grated. "You're turnin' out an all-fired nuisance."

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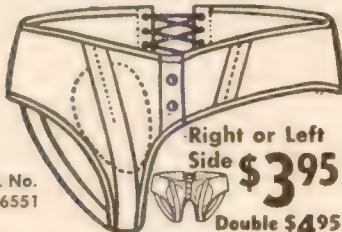
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"Wh-where to?" Dave stammered.

"Stockton! Head down the road to Stockton!"

"Send the girl back in here!" Joel Smith commanded.

Dave's lean young face tightened. But Judith pressed his arm and then moved back into the van.

Two horsemen approached at a gallop. They reined up as they reached the van.

"Look sharp, Merritt!" one warned. "Road agents!"

"Any news about Stuart Ransome?" Merritt asked as calmly as he could.

"Hurt bad, but he'll likely pull through. He's able to talk now. Says it was Joel Smith who shot 'im. Smith and Tim Cagle and Casey Barnes and Mike Beals are in the gang. Looks like Smith has been boss of a thievin' outfit in this district for months. We're riding back to Sonora for more men. Sheriff Work aims to smoke out those thieves if he has to have two hundred men fine-combing this country! So long!"

THE possemen rode toward Sonora. Dave lashed his oxen. Behind him, the van door opened. He heard Joel Smith speak.

"All right, gal. You can get back on the seat again."

Judith sat down beside Dave. "You heard?" he asked softly.

"Y-yes. They think my brother will recover!"

Presently she moved close to him, put her hand on his arm.

"Dave," she whispered, "you said Joel Smith killed that other messenger, Blacklock, some days ago?"

He nodded, heartsick.

"Dave," she said, facing the fact squarely, "then you can convict Smith of Blacklock's murder. He won't let us go now, will he?"

Merritt shook his head. "I guess he won't."

She didn't say anything. But her slim hand slipped into his.

Repeatedly they met horsemen on the road. Sheriff Work was really fine-combing the country. A couple of times Dave was questioned. He dared say nothing of his unwelcome passengers.

In mid-afternoon the van reached Mormon Creek, and here miners stopped Dave. Big Ed Neely had uncovered a pocket and taken out a chunk of quartz that weighed over ninety pounds. It was hog-fat with gold, practically solid nugget. They wanted pictures of the nugget, of Big Ed, and of the claim! And by George, Merritt would take them, or they'd haul him off his wagon.

Behind Dave, Joel Smith whispered from within the van. "Do it. Tell 'em you'll have to bring your apparatus and stuff down to the ground. But don't let 'em look in the van! My gun's on the gal."

Dave managed the delicate situation without a catastrophe. He was trembling in relief as he drove away.

At dusk, as Dave halted the van on the grassy creek bank below Carralitos, a dozen possemen came riding up.

Joel Smith warned Dave again. "The gal stays in the van. One wrong word out of you, and we kill her!"

After supper, the posse rode on. Then Judith and the three renegades climbed out of the van. With Dave's blankets, they bedded down in the brush.

"The gal can sleep in the van," Joel Smith said. "But don't try nothing rash, youngster. One of us'll sit on guard with a rifle all night, watching. You keep the fire blazing high too!"

Dave helped Judith fix a bed inside the van. As he said good night, she turned to him. Then she was in his arms, sobbing against his chest. He kissed her fragrant hair and spoke soothingly.

"Don't be afraid. We'll manage, somehow. You've got to sleep and get rested.

Merritt was busy for a long time with his chemicals and plates. Next morning they rolled on toward Stockton.

"Make time, damn it!" Joel Smith raged. "This van is slower than Noah's Ark on wheels!"

With Judith, on the seat beside him, quiet but so brave and lovely Dave did not want to hurry. Constantly he stole sidelong glances at her. The sun bur-

[Turn page]

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nished reddish tints in her dark hair. The line of her lips and chin was sweet, and her throat was youthful and soft. She caught him looking at her, and her smile was tender.

"Lash them damn oxen!" Joel Smith grated from inside.

Reaching the new camp of Keno, miners surrounded the van and asked for pictures. The fifty-cent ambro-types of California scenes were especially popular. Merritt sold a number. But he had to refuse to make portraits. He pleaded that he was out of chemicals and was on his way to Stockton to get fresh supplies.

"Dave," Judith asked soberly as they moved on again, "when will we reach Stockton?"

"After dark tonight," he answered in a low voice.

"Oh." Her own voice was low, but dread was plain in it to Dave's ear. He swore inwardly. When they met posse men patrolling the road, he was tempted to yell out that the hunted killers were inside his van. But he did not. For Judith would have been first to fall under Smith's vengeance.

The foothills were left behind, and the road stretched out across the great central valley of California. And there ahead of them finally, only an hour or two away, was Stockton.

"You know, Dave, I didn't like California at first," Judith said, a little catch in her voice.

"You came in the dry season."

"Yes. It all looked so sere and yellow. And the mining camps were so awfully crude. Even Sonora."

"But in the spring, Judith, when the hills are green and the poppies are blooming, you'd love it."

"I love it now, Dave. The mountains are all purple and gold. And look at the sky. I never saw such a lovely sunset in my whole life."

DAVE'S throat tightened up. He stared unseeingly ahead, heartbreak in his gray eyes. Judith's shoulder touched his, and her low voice was soft. "Dave, Dave—"

So warm was her tone, so much of feeling in it, that he turned, his eyes lighting up.

"I know what's going to happen to us,"

she whispered. "But somehow, I'm happy. I can't explain it. But I feel—reckless, and gay—just from being with you."

He dropped his bullwhip and took her in his arms and bent his head to meet her eager lips, willfully oblivious to the three outlaws behind them in the van.

The road swerved around a low brush-covered hill and skirted a dry creekbed shaded by a dense growth of sycamores. As the big van rumbled into the grove, horsemen suddenly pulled out of the brush and ranged themselves alongside the wagon. There must have been twenty of them. Not a word did they speak, but their grim faces watched Dave, and studied the van.

"Judith," Dave whispered. "Look."

Abruptly he stood up, Judith still in his arms—and jumped from the wagon seat. Twisting, he hit the ground beneath her, cushioning her. Still rolling, he pulled her with him beneath the van.

Instantly hell broke loose as the possemen fired pointblank into the sides of the big wagon. With a score of guns they blasted lead in a tearing, shattering volley through the van.

From within came yells of rage and one strangled shout of pain. Through the front door of the van, Cagle flung himself out of the death trap. Behind him came burly Joel Smith, a pistol blazing in each fist.

But the posse had been expecting this. Twice the guns roared in Joel's Smith's hands, but he was pitching face down to the dust even as his fingers worked convulsively on the triggers, a dozen slugs tearing the life out of the big body.

"Don't shoot!" Tim Cagle yelled. "You got us! We give up!"

The posse, with their prisoners, rode on toward Stockton. Dave and Judith followed in the van.

"But, Dave," Judith asked, "how could the posse have known the killers were inside the van?"

"Do you remember, yesterday, when those miners who found that huge nugget insisted I take pictures of it for them?" he answered. "Well, when I put my apparatus back in the van, I set it so's it would take a picture of the inside of the wagon. And, last night, after I fixed a bed for you in the van, I developed that picture. That's what my fussing around was.

[Turn page]

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It was dark by the time the van pulled into Stockton. Dave took Judith to a hotel where she could rest for a half-hour while he went to a barber shop. Later, he returned to the hotel for Judith. As he came in, she started, stared at him in amazement and slowly dawning realization.

He had shaved off his straggly young beard and mustache.

"Why, Dave," she gasped. "Dave! That picture you gave me of a man I was to say was Joel Smith, my intended—was your own picture."

"Yes. It was my picture and you showed it to everybody as the picture of the man you intended to marry." He paused, and went on still more gravely, "You see what sort of a position you've put me in? People will point me out on the street. I'll be a laughing stock. You've done me a great wrong, and I see only one way you can make things right."

Judith dimpled, but lowered her long lashes demurely. In a small, solemn voice she said, "I do want to make things right, Dave."

"There's just one thing you can do."

Judith looked up at him, her eyes shining, and her laughter rang out gay and young as her arms tightened around his neck.

"Yes, darling! I'll marry you!"

There and then, right in the main room of the hotel, David Merriott kissed her.

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We'll train and establish you in Your Own Business ... even if now employed

We are enlarging this 24-year-old world-wide chain of Duraclean dealerships. Many excellent locations are still available in the U.S.A., Canada, and other countries. If you are reliable and diligent, this is an opportunity to increase your income . . . and have the freedom, financial independence, and prestige of YOUR OWN business.

These are full time dealerships . . . but you can

start in spare time and have a profitable, lifetime business when your present job ends. A Duraclean dealer will train and assist you. He'll reveal his successful, proven methods and sales plans. He'll work with you.

Alert dealers can average \$5 hourly gross profit on service they render plus \$3 on EACH service-man at National Price Guide charges. This business is easy to learn . . . quickly established.

No Shop
Needed



Machine becomes
carrying case

24 YEARS
of PROVEN SUCCESS

You Become an Expert in cleaning and protecting Rugs and Upholstery

DURACLEAN cleans by *absorption*. It eliminates scrubbing . . . soaking . . . shrinkage. Aerated foam, created by electric Foamovator, restores the natural lubrication of wool and other animal fibers in rugs and upholstery. Dirt, grease and many unsightly spots vanish. Fabrics and floor coverings are cleaned with a new consideration for their life and beauty.

This modern process avoids strong soaps and machine scrubbing! This eliminates unnecessary wear on fabric and the breaking of fibers.

DURACLEANING is done in the home! Customers like this convenience. Fabrics dry in a few hours. Rug pile again stands erect and even. Brilliant colors revive. Furnishings become clean, fresh and enlivened.

DURAPROOF is another year 'round service rendered in the home, office or institution—without removing furnishings. It protects upholstery, rugs, furs, clothing and auto interiors against damage by moths and carpet beetles.

U. S. Government says "Moths are present in practically every household . . . No section of country seems free from such infestations." **DURAPROOF** kills moths and carpet beetles . . . it makes materials non-eatable to both. **DURAPROOF** is the ONLY moth-proof service backed by an Back, 4-Year Warranty.



International Money

Easy to Learn • No Overhead Expense

Permanent, Growing Market

Service is rendered in homes, offices, hotels, theaters, institutions and to revive used-car upholstery for auto dealers. There is need for these services in almost every building. Duraclean dealers operate from their home, an office or shop, as they prefer. It's easy to learn . . . we quickly train you. Rendering service yourself, at first, prepares you to train and supervise service men.

Repeat and Voluntary Orders

Demonstrations win new customers. **DURACLEAN** Dealers find **REPEAT** and **VOLUNTARY** orders a major source of income. Customers, enthused with results, tell friends and neighbors. Furniture and department stores and others turn over rug and upholstery cleaning and mothproofing to **DURACLEAN** Dealers. We show you 27 ways to get new customers.

Two-Way Profit

You enjoy big profits on BOTH materials and labor—after paying service men and salesmen. This is a year-round large-profit business. You have the cooperation of a 24 YEAR OLD organization interested in your success. If you want you should inquire now, TODAY, to become the owner of a **DURACLEAN** Service business, while territory is still available.

What Dealers Say

- W. Lookiebill: We've had 20 years of pleasant dealings. I'm 65 but am setting my sights for 20 more years.
Gerald Merriman: \$700 cleaning . . . 13 working days.
P. D. Freidinger: 70% of our business is repeat.
A. Ullman: Every demonstration has been a sale.
Ellsworth: Your advertising certainly has paid dividends.
M. Lassanske: My original investment was returned in about two months. I am not sorry in any way that I started my business "on a shoe string."
R. Kimbrough: Finished First White House of Confederacy and am to Duraclean the Governor's Mansion.
Margaret Turner: Took in \$106 in 15 or 18 hours.
L. Johnson: Each customer leads to 3 or 4 more.
T. Kemeri: We have 1,000,000 yen contract Duracleaning for U.S. Army in Japan.

Nationally Advertised

Your services are Nationally Advertised in Life, McCall's, Better Homes & Gardens, Ladies Home Journal, House & Garden, Maclean's (Canada's largest magazine), etc. See full-column ad in Jan. McCall's.

FREE Booklet

Our first letter and illustrated booklet will explain everything—the two modern, urgently needed services, waiting market, how business grows, your large profit, easy terms and PROTECTED territory. Send Coupon TODAY!

"OWN a Business" Coupon

DURACLEAN CO.
4-692 Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Illinois

With no obligation to me, send booklet and letter giving full details. Tell me how I may OWN a growing business of my own built upon satisfied customers.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

EASY TERMS

A moderate payment establishes your own business—pay balance from sales. We furnish electric machines, folders, store cards, introduction slips, sales book, demonstrators and enough material to return your TOTAL investment. Your business can be operating in a few days. Mail coupon today! No obligation.

Duraclean Co.

4-692 Duraclean Bldg., Deerfield, Illinois

CHEW IMPROVED FORMULA CHEWING GUM! REDUCE

Up to **5 lbs.** a Week With Dr. Phillips Plan

Reduce to a slimmer more graceful figure the way Dr. Phillips recommends—without starving—without missing a single meal! Here for you *Now*—a scientific way which guarantees you can lose as much weight as you wish—or *you pay nothing!* No Drugs, No Starvation, No Exercises or Laxatives. The Amazing thing is that it is so easy to follow—simple and safe to lose those ugly, fatty bulges. Each and every week you lose pounds safely until you reach the weight that most becomes you. Now at last you have the doctors' new modern way to reduce—To acquire that dreamed about silhouette, an improved slimmer, exciting more graceful figure. Simply chew delicious improved Formula Dr. Phillips Kelpidine Chewing Gum and follow Dr. Phillips Plan. This wholesome, tasty delicious Kelpidine Chewing Gum contains Hexitol, *reduces* appetite and is sugar free. Hexitol is a new discovery and contains no fat and no available carbohydrates. Enjoy chewing this delicious gum and reduce with Dr. Phillips Plan. Try it for 12 days, then step on the scale. You'll hardly believe your eyes. Good for men too.

\$1
12
DAY
SUPPLY
ONLY



Money-Back Guarantee! 10 Day Free Trial!

Mail the coupon now! Test the amazing Dr. Phillips KELPIDINE CHEWING GUM REDUCING PLAN for 10 days at our expense. If after 10 days your friends, your mirror and your scale do not tell you that you have lost weight and look slimmer you pay nothing.

AMERICAN HEALTHAIDS CO., Dept. CH-136,318 Market St., Newark, N. J.

Just mail us your name and address, and \$1.00 cash, check or money-order. You will receive a 12 day supply of KELPIDINE CHEWING GUM (improved Formula), and Dr. Phillips Reducing Plan postage prepaid.

NAME..... ADDRESS.....

STATE..... CITY.....

☐ Send me Special 24 day supply and FREE 12 day package for \$2.00. I understand that if I am not delighted with KELPIDINE CHEWING GUM and Dr. Phillips Reducing Plan, I can return in 10 days for full purchase price refund.

SENT ON APPROVAL — MAIL COUPON NOW!